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**ON THE PLAY AND THE PLAYING: THEATRICALITY AS
LEITMOTIF IN THE PURIMSHPIIL OF THE BOBOVER HASIDIM**

by

SHARI TROY

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2002

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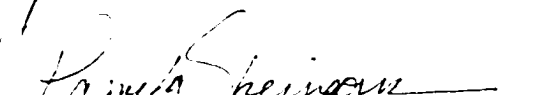
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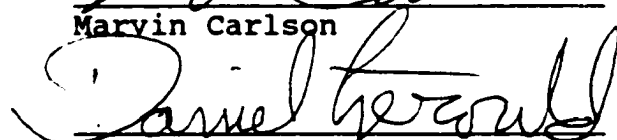
June 5, 2001
Date


Chair of Examining Committee
Judith Milhous

June 5, 2001
Date


Executive Officer
Pamela Sheingorn


Marvin Carlson


Daniel Gerould

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

ON THE PLAY AND THE PLAYING: THEATRICALITY AS LEITMOTIF IN THE PURIMSHPIIL OF THE BOBOVER HASIDIM

by

Shari Troy

Advisor: Professor Judith Milhous

Contemporary ultra-orthodox Jewish communities typically eschew theatre, cinema, television, and most other manifestations of popular culture, living a highly structured religious communal life and minimizing contact with the secular world. Yet, even the most rigorously observant allow theatrical performances during the festival of Purim. They often do so inside their house of study, in the presence of the Torah or holy scrolls, with the participation of the entire congregation.

How is it that theatrical activity comes to be encouraged as part of a religious observance and is practiced even by the most devout

on the holiday of Purim? This dissertation analyzes the incorporation of secular and profane elements, namely theatre and its conventions into the Purim celebration of the ultra-orthodox Bobover sect of Hasidim of Brooklyn, NY.

The *purimshpil* (Purim playlet) is the quintessential Jewish folk theatre form, which emerged from both the letter and the spirit of the law of the biblical *Book of Esther*. As such, it is a curious reflection of the Jewish experience from perspectives both within and outside of Jewish culture and incorporates both religious and secular elements.

The Bobover Hasidim, located originally in southern Poland, relocated to Borough Park, New York after the Holocaust, where they revived the tradition of presenting a folk play to the community on Purim. The group has elevated performance of the Purim playlet to an important place in its annual calendar of events.

This dissertation examines the *purimshpil* and posits the performance of this traditional folk play as an event rooted in both western theatre history and Jewish/Hasidic ritual. The cultural and theatrical artifact emerges as a part of the life-blood of the

community and an important element in the group's astonishing post-World War II revival.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to teachers, friends, and acquaintances that have contributed significantly to my work in this study. The process of writing the dissertation began in a class in Jewish Ethnography at NYU's Performance Studies Department. I thank Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for taking her students to see the Purim celebrations in Brooklyn and for encouraging me to think more and write about the *purimshpil*.

In my own department at CUNY, I have had the good fortune to learn from scholars who are devoted to the theatre and rigorous in their approach to scholarship. I thank Dr. Daniel Gerould for the eloquent and witty way in which he shared his extensive knowledge in classes. Dr. Marvin Carlson has had a great impact on me as a scholar and theatre academic. His singular devotion to the field, his love of the boards, and his extensive theatregoing and theatre thinking was inspiring to me throughout my tenure at the Graduate Center. Dr. Carlson challenged me, notably during my second exam. I thank him for affording me the opportunity to rise to the challenge, for it gave me the sense that I had acquired the tools necessary to

find a lifetime of answers in the field of theatre research. Dr. Carlson also helped me to define the parameters of this dissertation and much of the body of this work reflects his initial guidance. Dr. Judith Milhous, my advisor, was the first person to whom I turned to discuss the idea of this project. These years later, as I look back on the process, I find she has done no less than make of me a scholar. Dr. Milhous listened patiently, asked excellent questions, cajoled when necessary, and inspired me by her personal example. In working with her, I learned how to better my writing and my teaching and to demand at least as much of myself as she was demanding of me. It has been my pleasure and privilege to share this conversation with her. Dr. Milhous is always a serious and generous respondent despite my being at times, a vexing student.

My family has been supportive beyond the call of duty. I thank my mother Shula Troy, and my father Sid Troy Z"L for listening to my ideas, to my chapters as they were written, and for many hours of stimulating conversation about these matters. My sister Beth Troy read virtually every word of the manuscript and was unfailingly generous (and opinionated) in discussing the concepts presented. In so doing, she helped me to think through and necessarily defend

various parts of the work. I thank my family, particularly Shula and Beth, but also my sister Debbie for help with translating and transcribing hours of videotapes and written texts from both the Yiddish and the Hebrew.

I have been the recipient of unflagging support from friends throughout the highs and lows of this process. Dr. Anne Beck generously read portions of the manuscript, listened to my doubts and discoveries, fully discussed the concepts in this study, was ruefully and delightfully funny about the process, and encouraged me to keep going. My two dissertation groups, the first, comprised of Dr. Barbara Lewis and Susan Tenneriello and the second, of Susan Aberth, Risa Freeman, Anita Haravon and Beatriz Roman were sounding boards and support systems without whom the project would have withered as I went through my various stages of dissertation angst. I thank my cousin, Peter Sacks for helping me with video and computer support, for the diagram on page 327 and for commenting on portions of the text. Dr. Dorothy Chansky and Alisa Lebow shared their company with me at the shpil and Alisa gave me use of her pictures and video footage. Drs. Joel Berkowitz, and David Kaufman, as well as Daniel Orzech shared their

perceptions of the *purimshpil* from their perspective as non-Bobover revelers at table-side. I am grateful for the support of my friends Dr. Brenda Ness, Yael Nir, Devorah Sperling, Hilary Cemel, Susan Weinberg, and Brina Coronado for acts of friendship that sustained me. I thank Anita Rubin and David Schneiderman for their support during a crucial time. I appreciate the discussions and support of Dr. Jay Eidelman.

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Lastly, I wish to acknowledge two souls, my dear friend Irina Miller and my beloved father Sidney Troy, who traveled part of the journey with me but who were unable to accompany me to this crossing. In profound ways, they have enriched my thinking and I have been graced with their wisdom. May their memory be for a blessing.

In memory of my beloved father,
Sidney David Troy

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND TRANSLITERATIONS

All biblical translations are from *The New JPS Translation of the Hebrew Bible According to the Hebrew Text*, unless otherwise noted. All other translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Yiddish and Hebrew words are translated in the text and listed in the glossary as well. The language is noted alongside the word in the glossary. Transliterations of Yiddish follow the form of the Uriel Weinreich Modern Yiddish-English Dictionary. When Hebrew words, such as "seder" have come into English, I use the standard spelling in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

Chapter I: The Phenomenon and Methods for Studying It

Adhering to a Tertullianesque anti-theatrical prejudice in the ultra-orthodox Jewish community, rigorously observant Jews typically shun the making of theatre and plays.¹ Yet during the festival of Purim, the Bobover Jews, members of a contemporary ultra-orthodox Hasidic sect based in Brooklyn, New York, prepare and present an amateur theatrical to over 1000 co-religionists and guests.² This is possible only on Purim, the quintessential Rabelasian holiday within the Jewish tradition, during which inversions of the normative order are sanctioned.

Living in many lands as smaller enclaves of larger and distinctly different cultures, ultra-orthodox Jews have defined

¹Ultra-orthodoxy, as a sect within orthodoxy is a relatively modern phenomenon in Judaism; a defiantly conservative response to modernity, beginning in Europe in the 1860s and solidifying during the interwar years in Israel and after World War II in the United States. See Michael K. Silber, "The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition," in *The Uses of Tradition*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 23-84.

²Bobover is the name of one of the roughly twenty-five Hasidic sects in existence worldwide. The name corresponds to Bobowa, the name of the town in Galicia where the sect originated.

themselves and thrived as the antithesis of those gentiles in whose lands they have sojourned. The holiday of Purim enables them to play the role of their gentile hosts, as they perceive it. By inverting a number of Jewish customs and laws within an extended theatrical presentation, members of the Bobover community both overturn and reaffirm their own customs. In so doing, they present to the community at large representations of both who they consider themselves to be and those others from whom they deem themselves to be different. The Bobover look upon themselves as ultra-orthodox Jewish members of a Hasidic court. They differentiate themselves from members of other Hasidic sects as well as from other Jews, and from all gentiles. The role-playing that establishes representations of these different cultures generates a sophisticated picture of community members' ideas about Bobover/Hasidic Jew, mainstream Jew and gentile. Importantly, these images could only be created through the living lenses of theatre and theatricality.

Since it is within the context of a theatrical performance that notions of what is Jewish and gentile are created and represented to the audience on this holiday, I study the event to ascertain how

meaning is produced on the Bobover stage. I also study the crucial role of theatre and its conventions in contributing to the nature of that meaning. The festival of Purim has been duly acknowledged in Jewish studies as a carnivalesque holiday of role-playing and inversion.³ In the present study, I argue that traditional theatre studies (largely overlooked by Jewish studies scholars in relation to Purim and its attendant custom, the *purimshpil*) are directly relevant to comprehending the holiday. Indeed, I contend that the very impulse toward theatricality, posited by Nicolas Evreinoff to be a basic human drive, is a vital component of the Purim tradition.⁴

Furthermore, without the burgeoning of theatrical activity in Medieval Europe, the entire festival of Purim might have taken a different form. Therefore, my research of the Bobover Purim play is rooted in an examination of the means of production and reception of what is, in Evreinoff's sense of the word, a theatricalized event.

At the same time however, I extend my analysis to include

³The term carnivalesque here refers to the Bakhtinian notion, in which folk culture belongs to a realm between life and art and is regarded as deeply "shaped according to a certain pattern of play." See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1965; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University, 1984), 7.

⁴According to Evreinoff, theatricalization is the pre-aesthetic human impulse to imagine oneself in surroundings that are different from those of everyday life.

discussions of performance and performative activity that are crucial to the production of meaning in the Bobover *purimshpil* but that are not instances, *per se*, of what the OED calls theatre.⁵ In other words, the Bobover Purim ritual is a rich source of theatricalized behavior that extends beyond the proscenium arch into the audience seats (and beyond).

During the past twenty years the discipline of performance studies (with its links to cultural studies, anthropology, and feminist studies, among others) has emerged as a discipline equipped to interrogate those extra-theatrical instances of action that are not narrowly construed as theatre, but are loaded with significance for theatre studies, nonetheless. The modes of action performance studies has claimed within its purview are largely extra-textual and are often aligned with contemporary forms of popular or folk culture.⁶ Performance studies models are useful in examining how

See Nicolas Evreinoff, *The Theatre in Life*, ed. and trans. Alexander I. Nazarov (1927; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1970), 22-34.

⁵Performance and performative activity are defined here in Richard Schechner's formulation, as "the whole constellation of events . . . that take place in/among both performers and audience and from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance—the precinct where the theatre takes place—to the time the last spectator leaves." Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 72.

⁶The terms popular and folk culture here, follow the definition of anthropologist Richard Bauman as forms of culture that are regarded as a contrast to the most highly valued forms of elite or high culture. See Richard Bauman, "Introduction,"

people enact notions of identity in seemingly non-theatrical practices.⁷ For instance, it would be appropriate to investigate such activities as eating a meal, praying to God, or marching in a parade from the performance studies orientation.

Chapter one lays out the rationale of my study and provides a survey of literature used to explore the theatricalized Bobover event. Employing principles of performance therefore, my research considers the significance of the Bobover Purim celebration in broad terms. Both those practices regarded specifically as theatre and other practices that constitute extra-textual or extra-theatrical performances contribute to meaning in the *purimshpil*.

Chapter two describes the history, customs, and laws of Purim and illustrates how the practice of preparing a *purimshpil* is a natural outgrowth of these historical factors.⁸ The Jewish attitude toward history, moreover, has fostered receptivity to the act of role-playing as a means of making sense of the *Book of Esther*, the text

in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communication Centered Handbook*, ed. Richard Bauman (New York: Oxford University, 1992), xiii-xxi.

⁷For a discussion of common theatre versus performance binaries in the academy see Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, "General Introduction," in *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 1-5.

⁸The festival of Purim takes place on the 14th of Adar on the Hebrew calendar, which falls during February or March on the Christian calendar.

that the Purim festival commemorates. The literary form of this biblical book lends itself so completely to dramatization that it provides a significant impetus for the exceedingly theatrical nature of Purim's ritualized customs. Indeed, the concept of role-playing is inextricably connected to the particular meanings evoked by the festival observance. My study demonstrates how the very notions of theatricality and performativity generate meaning within the context of the holiday celebrations.

The holiday of Purim also functions as a Bakhtinian carnivalesque experience that corresponds to (and serves many, though not all of the same functions as do) similar events in other cultures. Indeed the rituals associated with the festival afford members of the Bobover community the opportunity to temporarily overturn their normative customs, thereby experiencing a feeling catharsis and evoking the *raison d'être* of the holiday: a temporary release from the prevailing notion of decorum into an ephemeral feeling of freedom. After the revelry, participants return to their religious and communal obligations, renewed. Therefore, this chapter posits Purim to be the quintessential Diaspora holiday; a

special day set aside to acknowledge the double identity of the Jew in a country not his or her own.

Many Purim customs were developed in tandem with the development of theatre practices at large. In fact, the *purimshpil* was the very impetus for subsequent expressions of other forms of Jewish theatre. Furthermore, the Bobover *purimshpil* has gleaned important characteristics from the theatre history of the world at large including some that derive from various high theatre forms. Thus, I also argue that the *purimshpil* custom is indeed a part of theatre history, and a genuine theatre event in and of itself. Though historically, Hasidic communities have regulated and attempted to minimize the impact of the dominant culture on their members, practices adopted by the Bobover players provide evidence that theatre functions as a point of entry of popular culture into even the most isolated community.

On a basic level, a sense of play and theatricality frames the various activities that take place along with the performance of the *purimshpil*. As we shall see, the ideas of overturning and reaffirming the Hasidic way of life take place symbolically during the *purimshpil*, partly due to the eloquent manner in which the

celebration is spatially and temporally organized. In the context of a ritualized celebration of a yearly festival, the Bobover community gathers to create, perform, and witness an amateur theatrical presentation.⁹ Yet, the play is only one part of an extended ritualized celebration that is conducted according to custom. The practices associated with the performance of the play are a series of performative events that take place before and after the actual amateur theatrical. Known in Hasidic custom as the *rebe's tish*, (the Yiddish term for rabbi's table) the celebration takes place around a huge table with the community's rabbi seated at the head place of honor.¹⁰ The participants sit around the table and so symbolize breaking bread with their leader. Thus situated, the community partakes of various activities of which the Purim play is one.

In chapter three I describe the spatial arrangements of the *purimshpil*, explaining how the physical set up of the *rebe's tish* and its relation to the theatrical stage (on which the *purimshpil* is

⁹While anyone may attend the *purimshpil*, (and people of all ages do attend) the event is considered the special province of the boys in the *yeshivah* who are teenagers or in their early twenties. Thus *yeshivah* students help prepare many of the technical elements.

¹⁰*Rebe* is a variation of the word *rabbi*, used only in Hasidic communities to refer to the charismatic leader who is head of the community's rabbinic dynasty. Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992), 3-5.

performed) elegantly imbues the event with layers of meaning. To a large extent, audience reception is both framed and structured by the table's ingenious design, which, over the course of the evening enables it to function variously as dining table, exalted altar, and theatrical stage. The deeply symbolic world of Hasidic culture gives this design its meaning. Therefore, chapter three also explores those elements of Hasidic ideology that contribute to meaning in the *purimshpil*. Furthermore, signification is created not only by the playlet given on the *purimshpil* stage, but also by a series of performative activities that occur at the *tish*. Thus, this chapter illustrates the temporal structure of the holiday revelry, showing how the pre- and post-play rituals symbolize as well as provide physical, emotional, and spiritual nourishment to the community of participants.

Chapter three also demonstrates the ways in which performative elements are integral to the construction of the Purim ritual. Since the very notions of theatricality and performativity generate the unique meaning of this event, I employ theatre history to describe this activity as based in a theatrical, rather than primarily ritualistic context. Relying on theatre theory (including

stage semiotics), performance studies, cultural studies and anthropology, I explain why theatre, theatricality, and play are the forms most profoundly suited to the experience of these people on this holiday.

Chapter four examines the symbolic associations created by the use of a table as the overall framing device of the event. Regarded by the community as a metaphorical feast, the *rebe's tish* is an arena charged with illustrative significance. The *tish* and its attendant *purimshpil* employ the aesthetics of theatre and play to create a profoundly spiritual sensibility. Although the plays performed contain much levity, Bobover members regard the themes of these narratives in all seriousness. Therefore, the subjects of the plays, the actual onstage narratives afford the onlooker a view to the concerns of community members.

Community considerations are the overriding impetus drawing together the Bobover *purimshpil* audience. As an authentic form of folk theatre, (i.e., as a form of popular or low culture) the *purimshpil* shares with other theatres of its type the characteristic of being largely intended for members of its own group. As in any expression of folk drama, participants in the audience delight in

seeing their culture reflected by actors known to all members of their society.¹¹ The experience enables group members to both celebrate and criticize their own laws, customs, and folkways.

To explore how Hasidic and gentile cultures are characterized in the Purim plays, chapter four considers the specific narratives handled in five representative plays. Four plays were recorded by the Bobover group on videotape during the years 1990 - 1994 (and are sold commercially, usually within the community). One other play, written in 1971 (and redacted later by Shifra Epstein, a non-Bobover university scholar) was published, in Yiddish, in 1998. Though a different story is told in each *purimshpil*, the similar themes that emerge from all of them reflect the Bobover community's preoccupation with demonstrating the differences between Hasidic and non-Hasidic lifestyles. This concern mirrors the general themes of the holiday.

Clearly, the Bobover *purimshpil* is significant as a Jewish religious and cultural ritual for the Hasidic participant. Like other religious rituals, the event enables community members to take part

¹¹"The strong sense of shared community that obtains . . . between performers and audience . . ." is an important aspect of any folk drama. See Steve Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Drama* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 170.

in the practice of custom and law through which Jewish identity is maintained. I contend that the Purim holiday, along with the complementary act of putting on a play, serves to acknowledge what a Turnerean perspective would posit as the liminal position of the Hasidic Jew vis-à-vis the dominant culture. While members of Hasidic communities may partake of the host culture on a number of levels, they also regard themselves as the antithesis to that culture in many instances. This sense of double identity and the paradoxes that result are reflected by the plays.

Chapter five examines *purimshpil* performance practices and demonstrates the way in which the perception of dual identity, crucial to the meaning of Purim, is forthrightly mirrored by the event. Indeed the sense of duality emerges as the central motif of the *purimshpil* and perhaps, of Hasidic identity as well. Virtually every practice adopted by the Bobover playmakers emphasizes incongruity.

Elements of Hasidic experience (and of the *purimshpil*, which reflects that experience) are contradictory, yet they are not finally irreconcilable. While the *purimshpiln* typically foreground diametrically opposing spheres such as mourning/celebration,

high/low, sacred/profane, and good/evil, and thus create a seesaw of emotions in the audience, the final scenes of the play inevitably bring together these disparate elements into a unified perspective. Participants at the *tish* view the *purimshpil* narratives as part of an ongoing conversation with God. Thus, eventual redemption, which is the hoped-for response of the Deity (and which may not arrive until after the play is over) creates the final unity in the mind of the believer/spectator. Chapter six therefore, examines the opposing realms that generate meaning in the *purimshpil*, demonstrating the way in which theatrical representation contributes to what is ultimately, a messianic and spiritual experience for the community of viewers.

Review of the Literature:

The project of situating the Bobover *purimshpil* in its context as a theatrical performance practice emerging from Jewish law and culture is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing on knowledge in Jewish studies, theatre history, theatre theory, performance studies and folklore/anthropology. Bert States' 1996 article "Performance

and Metaphor" notes that the field of theatre studies is "rapidly being reshaped by the principle of performance."¹² Similarly, Marvin Carlson's 1996 book *Performance: A Critical Introduction* succinctly discusses the concept of blurred boundaries (following Clifford Geertz).¹³ These theorists have (among others) elucidated a complicated fact, which directly relates to my project. I am writing an analysis of an amateur folk theatrical and its audience. Yet, this theatrical performance is at the nexus of a series of complex performative activities that generate meaning. In order to understand the phenomenon, a variety of analytical tools extending past the boundaries of theatre theory must be employed.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz' influential 1983 article, "Blurred Genres: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought," provided a jumping off point for scholars in a number of fields to examine the inherent complexity of social action by employing an assortment of analytical tools across disciplines.¹⁴ One of the most startling

¹²Bert States, "Performance and Metaphor," *Theatre Journal* 48 (March 1996): 2.

¹³Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 188.

¹⁴Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought." in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983). See also Victor Turner, "Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting," in *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 102-123. See also Richard Schechner, "Points of Contact"

insights put forward is that action, treated as discourse, yields a conceptual schema uniquely suited to uncovering the ways in which people make meaning of their lives. When action, which is fleeting in reality, is treated as a text, the researcher gains interpretive access to the ways in which meaning is inscribed in the first place. In other words, if we can understand the implicit discourse underlying the performance of social action, we can, in Geertz's estimation, also understand "the fixation of meaning from the flow of events."¹⁵

The decade since this article appeared has seen a wealth of critical writing about performance. The academy has not yet—and may never—agree on a single definition of this contested term.¹⁶ On the other hand, according to theatre scholar Marvin Carlson, "the image of performance as a border, a margin, a site of negotiation has become extremely important in subsequent thinking about such activity."¹⁷ Embracing the notion of performance's

in *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 3-33.

¹⁵Geertz, "Blurred Genres," 31.

¹⁶Carlson, *Performance*, 5. For a detailed survey of the major theories in the field, see *Ibid.* See also John J. MacAloon, "Introduction: Cultural Performances, Culture Theory." in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle*, (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 1-15.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

location on the perimeters of various disciplines, theatre scholar Richard Schechner has nevertheless posited two attributes as fundamental to all performance. In his book *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Schechner asserts that there exists a boundary between everyday life and performance (however variable and context-dependent it may be). In addition, within the specified borders, performers engage in action that Schechner refers to as restored behavior. This conduct, irrespective of origin, is living behavior used by the performer as a material object of the presentation.¹⁸

Accordingly, my study examines performative behavior in the *purimshpil* that exists within the bounds of performance but outside the limits of theatre *per se*. I seek to describe and analyze the restored behavior that contributes so prodigiously to meaning in this performance artifact. At the same time, the event has been analyzed from an anthropological perspective (as an artifact of folklore) but has never been examined from a theatrical orientation. The Bobover *purimshpil* is most definitely also a theatre

¹⁸Schechner, "Restoration of Behavior," in *Between Theatre*, 35.

performance with roots in theatre history and a part of my project is to claim it as such.

The biblical *Book of Esther* gives impetus to the holiday of Purim and to the performative practices associated with it. The story told is a history of the ancient Persian Jewish community's deliverance from annihilation and a description of the way in which the event is to be commemorated. Over time, as a body of practice (which reflected this text) emerged in Jewish communities, a body of literature was also developed to broaden people's understanding of the ways in which the holiday reflected Jewish experience.

The first commentaries on the *Book of Esther* in the *Talmud* (c. 5th cent. CE) prescribed low (popularly adopted) cultural practices to accompany the high (and legally mandated) practice of holding a ceremonial reading of the biblical text in the presence of the entire congregation. One popular practice that developed from folk interpretations of the *Talmud* was the creation and enactment of a play in which amateur actors would perform elements of the Purim story for the rest of the community. Using N.S. Doniach's 1933 *Purim or the Feast of Esther*, the pioneering study of the origins and practices associated with the holiday, I describe the

holiday and demonstrate which elements of Jewish custom gave rise to the theatrical event under consideration here.¹⁹

The practice of putting on a playlet during Purim began to develop during the Middle Ages in Europe, at a time in which Jewish people lived in close proximity to Christians who were themselves incorporating theatre into their religious ritual. Indeed, the *purimshpil* custom is indebted to both Jewish and non-Jewish influences. The general development of Medieval theatre as discussed by E.K. Chambers in *The Mediaeval Stage* and Glynne Wickham's *The Medieval Theatre* (and others) informs my work.²⁰ Most Jewish studies scholars regard the regularization of the *purimshpil* custom in Judaism to be the major impetus for the far later development of the secular Jewish theatre. Israeli scholar Chone Shmeruk's collection, *Yiddish Biblical Plays: 1679-1750*, the first volume of early plays in Yiddish (many of them *purimshpiln*) also contains an examination, in Hebrew, of the relationship of extant Yiddish texts to performance practices of Medieval Christian

¹⁹N.S. Doniach, *Purim or the Feast of Esther*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society Press, 1933).

²⁰See respectively, E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, (1903; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1925), and Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (1974; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987).

Theatre.²¹ Studies such as Ahuva Belkin's "Habit De Fou" in Purim Spiel?,"²² and Natalie Zemon Davis' "Rabelais Among the Censors (1940s, 1540s)"²³ establish a link between the general theatrical and cultural practices of the Middle Ages and Jewish traditions associated with the Purim holiday. Seminal works of Jewish history such as Israel Abrahams' *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* and Israel Davidson's *Parody in Jewish Literature* corroborate the connection.²⁴

An important aspect of Purim and closer yet to my analysis of the Bobover *purimshpil* is the notion of the carnivalesque. I use Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* as a theoretical basis with which to explore and explain the carnivalesque spirit that reigns in Purim traditions. According to this great theorist of the Medieval folk imagination, carnival during the Middle Ages was a time of renewal. The vitality of the revelry was intimately bound to people's throwing off the strictures of routine life and living for a

²¹Chone Shmeruk, *Yiddish Biblical Plays: 1679-1750* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, 1979).

²²Ahuva Belkin, "Habit De Fou in Purim Spiel?" *Assaph: Studies in the Theatre*, 2 (Section C, 1985): 40-55.

²³Natalie Zemon Davis, "Rabelais Among the Censors, (1940s,1540s)," *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990): 15-23.

²⁴Israel Abrahams, "The Jews and the Theatre," in *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (1958; reprint, New York: Meridian Books, 1961), 251-259. See also Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (1907; reprint, New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966).

time, “a second life, organized on the basis of laughter.”²⁵ For the folk, this other life existed only during times of festival and derived its exuberant character from direct opposition to the normative way of thinking in that society. Bakhtin characterized the official culture of the Middle Ages as intolerant and stern.

The very contents of medieval ideology—asceticism, somber providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering, as well as the character of the feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation—all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness.²⁶

Against this stifling tradition, medieval folk humor developed as a populist aesthetic that permeated speech, images of the body, and folk life in general with its expansive, sensual, and universal spirit of laughter.

This spirit is particularly discernible during Purim celebrations and is perhaps nowhere as apparent in contemporary Jewish custom as in the Bobover *purimshpil* tradition. Furthermore, it is fitting that this folk style found a receptive host culture among adherents of Hasidism. The Hasidic movement in Judaism

²⁵Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 8.

originated due to conditions that were analogous to the restrictive ideology that had earlier given rise to the Medieval folk spirit immortalized by Rabelais. The circumstances that helped generate the Hasidic movement are important to the aesthetic context in which the Bobover *purimshpil* takes place today.

The Hasidic way of life originated in Eastern Europe during the early eighteenth century and was, at least at first, an anti-scholarly revivalist movement of the unlearned folk and a break with the rabbinic authorities.²⁷ Orthodox Judaism of the second half of the previous century had become highly rational, punctilious and absolutist. The Hasidic movement, lead by charismatic *tzaddikim* (righteous men), de-emphasized the role of rabbis, cantors, and other functionaries, enabling laymen to take on such tasks as chanting the prayers.²⁸ Hasidism valorized the experience of the uneducated, asserting that simple acts of the folk, performed with purity of intention, were acceptable to God as fulfillment of

²⁶Ibid., 73.

²⁷Two earlier phases of mystical thought in Judaism are also referred to as Hasidic, but have no immediate relevance to this discussion. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (1946; Reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 330-338.

²⁸Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1996), 10.

religious obligation. The earliest Hasidic ideology, for example, claimed that devotion to God through prayer and good deeds was equally valid to rabbinic learning as a path to salvation. (The word Hasid means pious one). Eventually, the role of scholarly learning firmly reasserted itself in Hasidism.²⁹ However, the movement did retain its belief in mysticism, joyful religious expression and the distinctive relationship of a charismatic leader to a community of disciples.³⁰

These beliefs and customs, among others, contributed to the development of a folk aesthetic that came to be—and still is—expressed by specific behaviors, particularly at the *rebe's* court.³¹ While the Hasid is likely to act with appropriate societal decorum in everyday and business activities, life at court, particularly during the *tish*, brings forth modes of behavior that address spiritual needs. In this framework, displays of emotion, ecstatic singing and dancing along with fervent prayer are

²⁹Scholem, *Major Trends*, 345.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 343-344.

³¹For first person accounts of life in Hasidic communities, including the relationships of disciples to their *rebes*, see Jack Kugelman and Jonathan Boyarin, trans. & eds., *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1983). For anecdotal descriptions of Eastern European Hasidic customs, see Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People*:

considered by the community to be positive models of Hasidic behavior. This abandon is also often discernable in the individual's relationship to the *rebe*. Acts of reverence by the disciple, (such as prostrating oneself before the master) may be viewed as the expressions of devotion of the more spiritually committed. These behaviors, which express and reinforce the individual's connection to the numinous, are key to the *purimshpil* spirit in the Bobover community.

A body of literature within Jewish scholarship posits Purim as the quintessential Rabelasian holiday of the Jewish people. Monford Harris's "Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order,"³² Daniel Adler's "Drinking on Purim: When To Say When?,"³³ and Ruth Wisse's "A Purim Homily"³⁴ discuss the holiday and its traditional law practices from a Jewish studies perspective. An entire 1994 issue of *Poetics Today* entitled "Purim and The Cultural Poetics of Judaism" edited by Daniel Boyarin, examines Purim and its practices from a cultural

The Culture of the Shtetl, (1952; Reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1995). See esp., 176.

³²Monford Harris, "The Celebration of Dis-Order," *Judaism* 26(Spring 1977):160-170.

³³Daniel Adler, "Drinking on Purim: When to Say When?" *Judaism* 40 (Winter 1991): 6-15.

³⁴Ruth Wisse, "A Purim Homily," *Commentary* 93 (May 1992): 53.

studies perspective, itself suggesting an interdisciplinary approach.³⁵

This volume includes an article by Shifra Epstein in which she discusses the inversion of normative practices crucial to the Bobover community's celebration of the holiday.³⁶

The role of Torah³⁷ scholarship also contributes to meaning in the *purimshpil*. I use the work of a number of Torah scholars, most notably Daniel Boyarin and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, to explicate theatrical meanings that are rooted in study of the Pentateuch. Boyarin's *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* provides a detailed analysis of the complex methods of interpretation that constitute the very fabric of Hebrew biblical studies.³⁸ I use Zornberg's *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* to explain the midrashic interpretations of a number of biblical verses in order to give voice to the extra-theatrical meanings that may well be a part of the audience members interpretation of the play, even

³⁵Daniel Boyarin, "Introduction: Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judasim—Theorizing Diaspora," *Poetics Today* 15(Spring 1994):1-8.

³⁶Shifra Epstein, "The 'Drinking Banquet' (Trink-Siyde): A Hasidic Event for Purim," *Poetics Today* 15 (Spring 1994):133-152.

³⁷Torah is the Hebrew term for the Five Books of Moses.

³⁸Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1990).

when the stage text does not specifically attempt to reproduce the midrashic commentary.³⁹

Linda Hutcheon's 1985 *A Theory of Parody* helps to explain the importance of the phenomenon of parody and parodic texts to this performative community ritual. Indeed, the festival of Purim is inextricably bound with the performance of various forms of parody. Therefore, it is appropriate that this most theatrical of Jewish holidays would provide the soil for the development of the custom of mounting parodic plays. Yet, parody is not only a form of jest, but also a complex mode of discourse that can reveal a prodigious amount of information about its creator. In her examination of that genre in modern art, Hutcheon asserts that “parody is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion.”⁴⁰ The reader or viewer must be familiar with both texts in use in a given representation to fully comprehend its dual meaning. As such, parody depends on a degree of cultural

³⁹Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

⁴⁰Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 6.

sophistication in the spectator/viewer who must read one or more texts against another.⁴¹

Parody is used in the Bobover *purimshpiln* to represent that which the Hasid is not (or attempts to refrain from becoming). In fact, the plays make claims about both the Hasidic and non-Hasidic ways of life. Parody is a highly self-referential genre, but at the same time, one that employs multiple texts to make its argument. The creator of the parodic text is inevitably conversant with—and employing—texts from a discourse s/he considers that of the other. Accordingly, my study examines representations of the other in the Bobover plays in order to uncover the picture that the community puts forth of those not in their ken.

As a perpetual minority in all lands except, at times, Israel, members of Jewish communities have always necessarily been cognizant of cultures of the dominant groups in whose lands they have lived. In an article entitled “Semiotics of Purim,” talmudic scholar Harold Fisch argues persuasively that Purim custom, a practice for which Jews adopt the supposed gentile behaviors of feasting, drinking, and misrule is actually intended as a parody of

⁴¹Ibid., 19.

the gentile culture.⁴² The target of Purim laughter, according to Fisch “is not the tradition of sanctity but precisely that alien culture whose customs the celebrant adopts in his feasting and drinking.”⁴³ Fisch views Purim customs therefore, as creating a symbolic carnival, rather than a completely equivalent carnivalesque experience in the Bakhtinian sense.⁴⁴ While acknowledging the connection between Purim customs and the development of Medieval theatrical traditions, theatre scholar Eli Rozik argues similarly that Judaism effectively employed the *purimshpil* custom as a means of delaying the inevitable genesis of a secular Jewish theatre.⁴⁵ In an article entitled “The Adoption of Theatre by Judaism Despite Ritual: A Study in the Purim-shpil,” Rozik endeavors to put a degree of theoretical distance between some Purim customs and the advent of secular theatre. Rozik demonstrates that Purim traditions mandated by Jewish law, such as holding a ceremonial reading of the *Scroll of Esther* are taken seriously and protected by rabbinical authority with the “utmost

⁴²Harold Fisch, “Semiotics of Purim,” *Poetics Today* 15.1 (Spring 1994) 55-74.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Eli Rozik, “The Adoption of Theatre by Judaism Despite Ritual: A Study in the Purim-shpil,” *The European Legacy*, 1999, no. 4:77.

zeal.”⁴⁶ My study, therefore, examines the text of the Esther scroll to establish how the story it tells—regarded by believers as a historical document—provides the soil for the development of the *purimshpil* custom.

Purimshpil performances are rife with historical information; they are repositories of collective memory. Historically, Jewish life in Diaspora has been characterized by lesser and greater degrees of accommodation and/or resistance to the various host cultures wherein Jews have lived. Moreover, since Purim customs allow—indeed require—believers to bring elements of the culture of others into the foreground of their consciousness, the holiday is a locus for a rich store of information about both the performing Jew and the Jewish views of the cultural other that s/he performs. According to theatre theorist Joseph Roach, through performances representing self and others, people simultaneously present and invent themselves. In his book *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Roach describes ways in which people of various cultures in the circum-Atlantic rim (c. eighteenth century to today) performed their pasts and their identities in the presence of others:

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 81.

They could not perform themselves, however, unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not. By defining themselves in opposition to others, they produced mutual representations from encomiums to caricatures, sometimes in each other's presence, and at other times behind each other's backs.⁴⁷

While the cultures studied by Roach are different from the culture of the Hasidic Jews of interest to me, the above-quoted text pertains exactly to Bobover *purimshpil* performances. The Bobover Purim role-playing generates a doubled view of Hasidic experience, encompassing self and other—and possibly, a Jewish view of us versus them.

In the circum-Atlantic rim, Roach discerns a verdant ground for the production and performance of an interculture that is teeming and cross-fertilized with the energy and contributions of various societies. He discusses the ways in which those societies performed their pasts and what those performances expressed about the enacting cultures/bodies.⁴⁸ Roach asserts that the “custom of self definition by staging contrasts with other races, cultures and

⁴⁷Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

⁴⁸Ibid.

ethnicities. . . ” brings issues of identity and difference into prominence.⁴⁹ In his view, one group cannot perform their notions of the other without also creating a picture of those of their own community.

Roach’s analysis of circum-Atlantic performances demonstrates the inextricable link between memory and performance and describes the procedure by which cultures employ both to create and recreate themselves. In his view, societies continually renew themselves by a process of “surrogation,” the movement of substitutes into the gaps left by death (or other absences) in the social make up.⁵⁰ Since substitutes are never exactly the same as that which they replace, surrogation generates additional activity (often in the form of anxiety) in those who have remained. The distress that accompanies attempting to shore up gaps in the social fabric often leads to performances that rewrite history or are, in Roach’s terminology enactments of forgetting. These enactments often seek to create a prelapsarian myth of origin, which may alleviate apprehension caused by fissures and discontinuity in the social system.⁵¹ Yet, even

⁴⁹Ibid., 6.

⁵⁰Roach, 5.

⁵¹Ibid., 3.

gaps are not empty: Roach asserts that “performances, performance traditions, and the representations of performance. . . often carry with them the memory of forgotten substitutes.”⁵² Thus, performances may reveal a wealth of information about both the open and hidden preoccupations of those people who are representing the cultures of the other.

This notion aptly describes the forces that bear on the Bobover Purim celebrant’s role-playing. The festival is, in effect, a costume ball during which revelers enact and parody themselves and the other in the presence of their own community. The theme of the party is inevitably historical—and the subtext of the revelry is invariably “this is who we are not.”⁵³ Of course, celebrants cannot perform who they think they are not without also performing their notions of who they believe they are. Consequently, theatricalized Purim traditions, which abound in contributions from within and without, provide a rich field for investigating Jewish culture and Jewish attitudes to the cultures of others. Since traditional Judaism

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Samuel Heilman, “Purim: This Is Who We Are Not,” in *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 108-116.

does not authorize the practice of theatre except on Purim,⁵⁴ the festival provides a point of entry for theatrical notions and behaviors into Jewish practice. In other words, the holiday is a locus for the introduction of secular and non-Jewish ideas in Judaism, bringing with it the vitality and fecundity that accompanies such meetings of cultural opposites.

Roach's model can be used to demonstrate the way in which Purim practices—during which celebrants stand in for the (dangerous) gentile and the (endangered) Jew—express the collective Jewish memory and perhaps more specifically, the trauma of collective Jewish memory in Diaspora. Paradoxically, the very same practices, which on Purim afford the faithful Jew distance from his or her everyday attitudes ultimately strengthen identification with and proximity to those same sensibilities. Additionally, allusions to an expected messianic conclusion to the Jewish plight in Diaspora help to allay anxiety caused by community members' tangible experience in their everyday lives in contemporary Diaspora.

The actual event, an amateur theatrical performance given by and for the benefit of a Hasidic community, has been examined as

⁵⁴Note that while this is the dominant view in religious Judaism, it is not absolute.

one aspect of an anthropological study of the holiday of Purim in the Bobover community by Shifra Epstein in her 1979 Ph.D. dissertation "The Celebration of a Contemporary Purim in the Bobover Hasidic Community."⁵⁵ Epstein has described (Hasidic) customs of the Bobover community as they relate to Purim. Indeed, an understanding of the Hasidic worldview is essential to enable the reader to comprehend the concept of the *rebe's tish*, a performative event that ethnographer Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls the distinctive Hasidic performance genre.⁵⁶

Mystical theology has contributed to the distinct nature of Hasidic Purim customs and directly affects the role of representation on the Bobover stage. Hasidim subscribe to the Kabbalistic view of Purim first articulated by the Jewish mystics of the sixteenth century. In their view, the joyous holiday of Purim is symbolically linked with the solemn Day of Atonement, Yom HaKippurim (also

See Abrahams, 251-256.

⁵⁵Shifra Epstein, "The Celebration of a Contemporary Purim in the Bobover Hasidic Community" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1979).

⁵⁶Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Performance of precepts/precepts of performance: Hasidic Celebrations of Purim in Brooklyn," in *By Means of Performance*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 109-117 [quotation at 110].

known as Yom Kippur).⁵⁷ In Hasidism, earnest observance of these two contrasting days—Purim, when the profane prevails, and Kippurim, when the sacred predominates, can combine to effect redemption. In fact, some Hasidim believe that the spirit of inversion allows even greater repentance to be manifested on Purim than on Kippurim. For this reason, Purim in Hasidism is of major importance—a providential time of devotion, despite its minor status in the formal Jewish law.⁵⁸

This mystical interpretation of Purim and Kippurim is but one of numerous aspects of Hasidic theology that locate meaning in presumably veiled phenomena.⁵⁹ It is understandable that the *Book of Esther* which, according to biblical scholar Jon Levinson, “makes most of its points by indirection,”⁶⁰ would be regarded by Hasidim

⁵⁷In Hebrew the word *Kippurim*, which means atonement can also be translated as 'like Purim.'

⁵⁸The Day of Atonement, considered in *Halakha* (along with the Sabbath) to be the holiest of days, is observed by acts regarded as pure, such as fasting, prayer, and repentance. Purim, considered by Jewish law to be a minor holiday, is observed by the indulgences of numerous feasts and the imbibing of much liquor. For an explanation of a number of elements of Hasidic theology and their relation to Bobover Purim customs, see Epstein, “The ‘Drinking Banquet,’” 134-136.

⁵⁹Central to Hasidic theology is the Kabbalistic doctrine of the *Ein-Sof*, (the Without-End), which asserts that there is a (hidden) aspect of God that is utterly transcendent and beyond human apprehension. See Lawrence Fine, “Kabbalistic Texts,” in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz, (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 305-359.

⁶⁰Jon D. Levinson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 12.

as a text rife with enigmatic signification. In fact, the *purimshpiln* mirror the basic theological ideas gleaned by Hasidism from the *Book of Esther*.

The social context of the Hasidic world relates directly to the performative activities of Purim. Hasidic communities are typically organized as courts, with the *rebe* as the head of a line of dynastic leaders. The intense and personal relationship between the leader and his followers frames all of the activities within which the *tish* takes place. In fact, the most profound values of Hasidic life are reflected exquisitely to the audience by the spatial and temporal set up of the *rebe's tish*. Thus, just as semioticians have decoded meanings of Renaissance court theatre practices by describing the social organization of the societies that produced them, my analysis of the *purimshpil* (and the *tish* around which it takes place) depends to some extent on knowledge of the Hasidic system of beliefs.

Along with her previously mentioned dissertation, Shifra Epstein has written a number of informative articles over the last twenty-five years on various aspects of the Bobover community. Her keen interest in this group has provided an anthropological

basis upon which I build in undertaking this theatrical study. In addition, the last ten years has seen a lively interest of both scholars and popular writers in the culture of Hasidism. Recently, Hasidic communities and their cultural practices have been viewed from sociological and anthropological perspectives. *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra Orthodox Judaism* by Samuel Heilman,⁶¹ *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* by Jerome R Mintz,⁶² and *Boychicks in the Hood* by Robert Eisenberg⁶³ are three recent studies that describe the community in question and provide a background for my work. My investigation uses Gershom Scholem's authoritative work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*,⁶⁴ along with Aaron Wertheim's important study *Law and Custom in Hasidism*⁶⁵ to explain a number of Bobover Purim customs that are rooted in Jewish mystical thought.

Shifra Epstein's article entitled "The first [sic] Purim Shpil of the Bobover Chasidim in New York after [sic] the Shoa," illustrates a

⁶¹Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith*.

⁶²Mintz, *Hasidic People*. 1992.

⁶³Robert Eisenberg, *Boychicks in the Hood: Travels in the Hasidic Underground* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

⁶⁴Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

⁶⁵Aaron Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, trans. Shmuel Himelstein (Ktav Publishing, 1992).

fascinating yet anomalous play in the Bobover tradition.⁶⁶ In addition, this commentary touches briefly on the place of the Purim holiday in the Bobover community's experience. Moreover, this study gives (limited) attention to the important place of theatricality and performativity to the Purim revelry. Epstein's 1998 monograph, "The Daniel-shpil in the Bobover Hasidic Community" gives a wealth descriptive information of the Bobover plays, including the written text of a previously unpublished (and to date, the only published) play.⁶⁷ My study builds on Epstein's valuable information; providing a theatrical analysis that identifies the relation of the Bobover performance practice to the history and theory of theatrical staging.

In her article entitled "Performance of precepts/precepts of performance: Hasidic celebrations of Purim in Brooklyn," [sic] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the Purim celebrations among Hasidim in Brooklyn.⁶⁸ Focusing on festivities in the home, *bes medresh*, and street, the author illustrates the way in which these

⁶⁶Shifra Epstein, "The first [sic] Purim Shpil of the Bobover Chasidim in New York after [sic] the Shoa," in *Chulyot: Journal of Yiddish Research* 3 (Spring 1996): 317-325.

⁶⁷Shifra Epstein, "The Daniel-shpil in the Bobover Hasidic Community," in *Yiddish Texts and Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998).

⁶⁸Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 109-117.

activities, including play performances, are invested with meaning for the participants. My analysis of the Bobover *purimshpiln* seeks to describe in detail how significance is generated on the Bobover stage. In so doing I explore the "studied effort to suppress the aesthetics of virtuosity," which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett cites as important to the Bobover *purimshpil* tradition.⁶⁹

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, the Purim celebration is a complex event. Indeed, even the *purimshpil*, which typically takes place in the *bes medresh*, is an activity embedded within a series of additional performative events. Therefore, my analysis is broader than a discussion of only the plays performed, but includes an examination of the entire range of performative activities surrounding a given play as well. My inquiry employs theoretical models from performance theory and cultural studies to allow me to expand the discussion into areas that are technically outside the theatre purview and in the domain of performance.

In the 1960s, American director Richard Schechner experimented with performances that existed in a realm between the fictional world of the illusionistic theatre and the purposeful

⁶⁹*ibid.*, 117.

behavior of everyday life. Influenced by the work of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, Schechner created environments that became a major component of the theatrical aesthetics for both the actors in the playing space and the spectators in the audience arena.

Environmental theatre, as it came to be called, encouraged the audience to interact actively with a variety of elements in the production. In both found and transformed spaces, Schechner staged theatrical events in which players and audience moved through each other's domains.⁷⁰ In works such as *Dionysus in 69*, new relationships between actor/spectator and among audience members themselves emerged from the unorthodox use of space.

Schechner's theoretical reflections on this work as well as on the happenings of Alan Kaprow and others led to the 1968 publication of his groundbreaking "6 Axioms For Environmental Theatre."⁷¹ In this essay and in later works, Schechner formulated a theory of performance that proposed a greatly modified conception of theatrical space from what had heretofore predominated in twentieth century American theatre. Claiming that "traditional

⁷⁰Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973) 1-39.

⁷¹Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre," *TDR* 12:3 (Spring 1968): 41-64.

distinctions between art and life no longer function[ed] at the root of aesthetics,” Schechner presented an approach that de-emphasized (and sought to dismantle) the rigid separation of actor and audience, stage and auditorium, illusion and reality. Instead, he stressed the necessary interrelatedness of all components of the theatre event.⁷² That connectivity, Schechner found, was foregrounded and nurtured by the practices of environmental theatre. Though not the first practitioner to work in this manner, Schechner was able, in his 1973 book *Environmental Theatre*, to articulate a system by which many of the dynamics of theatre would be transformed.

As a theorist, Schechner’s innovation was to find (and mine) a rich field for the investigation of performance in the realm between life and theatre. In “6 Axioms,” Schechner elaborated on Michael Kirby’s notion of matrixed and non-matrixed performing to posit a continuum from “impure life,” or functional activities to the “pure art,” or aesthetics of traditional theatre.⁷³ Locating environmental

⁷²Richard Schechner. “6 Axioms,” 42.

⁷³Ibid., “6 Axioms,” 41. Schechner cites Kirby’s notion of non-matrixed performing, which referred to behavior in which there were no “matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time.” See Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987): 4-5.

theatre in the middle of the continuum, Schechner posited a poetics of theatre in which the relationships between the various elements in a performance took precedence over individual segments.

Eventually, working with the anthropologist Victor Turner, Schechner developed a model to explain the important connection between efficacious ritual and aesthetic theatre, showing how the two can “overlap, interpenetrate, simultaneously and redundantly arousing and using every channel of communication.”⁷⁴

Interestingly, the *purimshpil* owes its success as performance to the productive way in which the event uses the theatrical environment to straddle the realms of theatre and life. Precisely due to its combining of ritual and theatre, the *purimshpil* engenders a wealth of meaning.

Theorists in various disciplines use the concept of the magic circle to denote a special realm, marked off from the everyday world, in which behavior is mediated not by the outside culture but by the conventions that describe the circle itself.⁷⁵ Behavior within this arena is not subject to the causes and effects of the everyday

⁷⁴Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 120-122. See also Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982).

⁷⁵The idea of the magic circle has been employed in the fields of anthropology and psychology as well as theatre as will be discussed below.

world but is instead subject to its own order. At the *purimshpil*, participants are invited to temporarily let go of the normative rules of their lives and follow those of an alternate system. For the Bobover Hasidim, the *tish* on Purim is a domain in which the normative codes of life are relaxed and participants subscribe to theatrical conventions that require restored behavior and consequently, generate the unique meaning of the activity.

Unlike the daily world of study, worship and work, at the Purim *tish* a playful mood is (at least in part) routinely cultivated by the performance. As with other theatrical events, the realm of illusion takes precedence over the mundane. In his book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, Bert States posits theatre to create “the magic circle where the conventions of theatricality have assured us that the real has been subdued and transcended.”⁷⁶ In States’ view, the theatrical arena creates an interlude during which spectators are able to imagine themselves as outside of the real. This concept applies to the Purim *tish*. Without a doubt, during the time of engagement in the

⁷⁶Bert States. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 34.

purimshpil, many participants focus on the fictive zone within the magic circle and regard the everyday world as irrelevant.

Within the designated boundaries of the *purimshpil*, the faithful substitute role-play, inversion and dressing in theatrical costumes for their normative daily conduct. In short, the playful world of illusion and theatre replaces the everyday world of work and study. In this way, the Bobover community attends most devotedly to the enterprise of observing the Purim festival.

According to J. Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, his seminal study of the role of play in culture, games create order that is in turn invested with rhythm and harmony.⁷⁷ Therefore, successful play leads to a sensation of wholeness. According to Huizinga, the “feeling of ‘being apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world, ” brings a sense of well being and creates a state which Huizinga calls “a temporary. . . limited perfection.”⁷⁸

Anthropologist Victor Turner has described a similar process that takes place in the performance of rituals as *communitas* or

⁷⁷J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1944; Reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 10.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 12.

liminality. According to Turner, group rituals occur within a frame that surrounds the activity, defining both the participants within, and the meaning ascribed to their actions as something apart from the structures of normative society.⁷⁹ Therefore, within this boundary humans are temporarily liberated from their standard behavioral constraints. Within this liminal realm, the person may experience a model of human society as a homogenous and unstructured domain in which people behave toward one another in a free and innovative manner.⁸⁰

The concept of flow has been developed by psychological theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe a similar heightened state of consciousness. Flow is the result of activities in which a participant's action and awareness are merged such that there is a loss of self-consciousness. In this state, a person often feels that time is transformed; that he or she is so absorbed in the event at hand that external reality ceases to be important for the duration of the activity.⁸¹ Csikszentmihalyi has described this state as "a unified

⁷⁹Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 55. Note that Turner credits Irving Goffman and Gregory Bateson with the usage of the term frame.

⁸⁰Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 47.

⁸¹Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975), 36. The concept of flow has also been useful to theorists

flowing from one moment to the next.”⁸² This sensation can be experienced in any one of a number activities, but is frequently the result of certain kinds of experience, such as theatre, games, and ritual.

For many spectators, the *purimshpil* is a flow experience.⁸³ The playful mood that reigns at the event is engendered by the communal act of imagining together. The intense frame of mind created by the symbolic banquet held around the *rebe's tish* prepares celebrants to fully partake of the theatrical illusion that is later established by the narrative onstage. The banquet table encourages the transmission of the information in an atmosphere of *communitas*. The open lines of communication between the actors on stage and the *rebe* at the table help to facilitate a state of emotional receptivity in the rest of the audience. The collective experience encourages a high degree of focus such that spectators may feel fully and organically involved in the activities before them.

of theatre, anthropology, and games since it describes a common response to activities in those fields. See Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 55-58. See also Schechner, *Between Theatre*, 124.

⁸²Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, 36.

⁸³I am indebted to Shifra Epstein for making the connection between the concept of flow and the *purimshpil* in her dissertation. See Shifra Epstein, “Celebration,” 206-207.

During the weekly *tish*, the *rebe* addresses the group with *toyreh*, a spoken discourse that reflects the community's values and deepest goals.⁸⁴ On Purim, actors undertake the role of speaker and the address is given in the form of a dramatic narrative. While the weekly *tish* establishes a reverent and often ecstatic mood in the followers,⁸⁵ the *purimshpil* generates a playful attitude. At the same time, the lessons offered by the players at this event are of paramount meaning to participants. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's action into a unified flow experience."⁸⁶ In seeking to understand how meaning is generated on stage at the *purimshpil*, the following two questions become paramount. First, what is the implicit meta-discourse underlying the performance of the cultural product which is the *purimshpil*? Secondly, how does that discourse (and its various sub-texts, including the written narratives enacted on stage) cohere to create a conceptual framework that is meaningful to its participants?

⁸⁴*Toyre* is the Yiddish word for Torah, the body of Jewish canonical works. The *rebe's* sermon is also referred to as *D'var Toyrh* (Words of Torah) or *Toyre*.

⁸⁵For descriptions of various *tishn*, see Mintz, *Hasidic People*, 273-275. See also Kugelmas & Boyarin, "The Kozhentiser Rebe," in *Ruined Garden*, 85-88. For an anecdotal account, see Zborowski, *Life is With People*, 273-275.

These questions are partially answered by the psychological impact of the magic circle on congregants. The imaginary banquet contributes enormously to participants' perception of the performance's meaning. Carl Jung's notion of the circle as a protective mechanism explains the magical quality that is ascribed to the form by many theorists:⁸⁷

The drawing of a spellbinding circle is an ancient magical device. . . used since olden times to set apart as holy and inviolable. . . a protected temenus, a taboo area where he [the dreamer] will be able to meet the unconscious.⁸⁸

In an article on spatial interrelations in the theatre, author Yael Nir describes the psychological role the magic circle can play in group work:

The circle or temenus shelters the self from splintering. . . The ritual action of drawing the charmed circle has the effect of leading the subjects' attention back into the inner precinct in order to rediscover the lost unity of life and consciousness.⁸⁹

⁸⁶Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 216.

⁸⁷I am indebted to Yael Nir, whose article on the circle and the grid in the work of experimental theatre director Rina Yerusahalmi beautifully makes these connections. See Yael Nir, "Israel's Rina Yerusahalmi and Her Directorial Experiments in Spatial Interrelations," in *New Theatre Vistas: Modern Movements in International Theatre*, ed. Judy Lee Oliva (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 183-196.

⁸⁸Quoted in Nir, "Spatial Interrelations," 187.

⁸⁹*ibid.*

In the case of the acclaimed experimental production of *Hamlet* she describes, the magic circle created an ideal working environment for the actors. Using the shape of a circle as the foundational physical element of all blocking, the director created a protected space within which actors worked. Psychologically, the circle permeated their working process as well as audience reception of the performances.

In the *purimshpil*, the *tish* functions as the charmed circle; the protected space within which disciples can experience the sensation of flow, of intense one-ness with the *rebe*, with their community, with God and ultimately, with the self. This reality was hinted at by a Bobover youth who commented, “It’s so much more beautiful at the Rov’s [*rebe*’s] *tish* when everyone is singing and dancing. It’s really something the heart can see.”⁹⁰ The sensation of flow is not always, but is often experienced at the *purimshpil*. When spectators are totally absorbed by the narrative, they share in the theatrical discourse with a sense of liberation.

Lastly, the emotional nourishment afforded the community by the metaphoric banquet replicates the sustenance derived in secular

society from the most successful theatre forms. Though implicit, the link between the magic circle and provender harks back to ancient times. Bert States describes the correlation between theatre and physical nourishment in the following manner:

It is probably less through anthropological findings than through nostalgic stirrings that we have always thought of the early stage as having begun on the circular threshing floor on which the community's food was winnowed from nature. It does not matter whether this was in fact the case, only that the image of the threshing floor substantiates our feeling that there is a connection between theater, as ritual, and the symbolism of food.⁹¹

Similarly, the *purimshpil*, a theatrical event that takes place as an extension of a symbolic feast, is brimming with associations of emotional, spiritual, and physical sustenance.

Biblical tradition similarly posits a metaphoric correlation between altar and table (with the sacrificial offering upon the former and food upon the latter). The bible uses the terms in proximity, at times referring to the altar as God's table and calling

⁹⁰Quoted in Robert Mark Kamen, *Growing Up Hasidic: Education and Socialization in the Bobover Hasidic Community*, (New York: AMS Press, 1985), 53.

⁹¹States, *Great Reckonings*, 39.

the sacrificial offering God's food.⁹² In fact, according to biblical historian Lawrence Schiffman, some types of sacrifices in ancient Israel were considered a meal shared with the deity, expressing a relationship of intimacy between God and the worshipper. "The burning of certain portions of the sacrificial animal as an offering to God and the eating of other portions by the celebrants created a bond of familial love between God and man."⁹³ With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Judaism made the transition from Temple-based to synagogue-based worship. Prayer was portable and the act of sacrifice could only be undertaken on the Temple altar in Jerusalem. A major shift in Judaism occurred when the practice of prayer as a normative mode of worship replaced that of sacrifice.⁹⁴

Geertz's model of thick interpretation of cultural practices is appropriate in assessing the customs associated with altar, table,

⁹²See Mal 1:7-12 , Num 28:1, Ez 42:21-24,

⁹³Lawrence Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1991), 28. For a discussion on the analogy between table and altar in Judasim, see Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 249-275.

⁹⁴Ibid.

food, and offering.⁹⁵ Whether practiced in biblical Israel or in present-day Brooklyn, whether verbal or corporeal, the text underlying both customs is a discourse of filial devotion to The Almighty. The meal shared (and its associations of intimacy) bespeaks a personal relationship of parent-child nature between worshipper and God. In Hasidism, the table has taken the place of the altar and the symbolic food, that of the physical offering. However, the conversation is essentially the same as that underlying the sacrifice at the Temple in ancient Jerusalem. The *tish* is a repast shared with the *rebe*, and through him, as it were, with God. In an evocative commentary, the Talmud asserts, “At the time when the Temple stood, the altar used to make atonement for a person; now a person’s table makes atonement for him.”⁹⁶

In the case of the *purimshpil*, the meal around the table is (mainly) a symbolic feast of words. Biblical tradition correlates food to speech just as it does table to altar.⁹⁷ In as much as the

⁹⁵Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 3-30.

⁹⁶According to Rabbis, the table atones for man through the hospitality shown to poor guests. See *The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Hagigah*, Vol. 10, trans., Rabbi Dr. I Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1938), 170.

⁹⁷See for example, Ez 3:1-3, in which God serves Ezekiel a scroll and tells him to feed his belly with it—which Ezekiel does, enjoying it heartily. See also the canonical commentary by the medieval Rabbi Rashi on Mal. 9:12 in which the

threshing floor of the Greek theatre may have been an arena accommodating both food and its symbolic correlative, theatre, the Hasidic *tish* accommodates food as well its symbolic correlative, speech. Therefore, words said at table have symbolic meaning:

If three persons have eaten at one table and have not spoken thereat words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten sacrifices offered to the dead . . . but if three have eaten at one table, and have spoken thereat words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten at the table of the all present, blessed be he, as it is said, this is the table before the Lord.⁹⁸

Hence, in Judaism, speaking words of Torah at table, as established by this Talmudic commentary, is enthusiastically encouraged.⁹⁹

In her ethnography of Bobover Purim practices, Shifra Epstein makes the connection between the Hasidic custom of giving sermons around tables and the above Talmudic tractate.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, at the

fruit offered on the Lord's table is understood to be the fruit of the lips. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, "Commentary on the Book of Genesis," in *Soncino Chumash: Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth*, ed. The Rev. Dr. A. Cohen (1983; Reprint, London: Soncino Press, 1993), 161. CF Isa. 19:18-21 in which Isaiah foretells that Egyptians will speak the Cananite language, following which they will sacrifice and make vows to the Lord.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹*Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Avoth*, Volume 22, trans., Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1938), 28.

¹⁰⁰For a history of the development of the custom of the *tish*, its connection to Jewish canonical texts, and its relation to contemporary Bobover Purim practice see Epstein, "Celebration," 157-160.

purimshpil tish, theatrical plays take the place of the *rebe's toyreh*, functioning as the homily or sermon. Thus, these narratives provide an indication of the underlying text inscribed by the custom. The *purimshpil* narratives function as an important element of the conversation the celebrant understands himself to be having with God while reveling at the Purim table. Like the sacrificial offering at the altar, the meal at table attests to the worshipper's devotion to God and to the celebrant's ongoing vow to live within the bounds of His covenant with Abraham.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, God's promise to the Jews—that is, the communal and individual redemption of His People—is an inextricable element of the discourse. This expectation on the part of the worshippers is clearly manifest in the Purim plays.

The approach of Victor Turner to celebration and ritual in such works as *From Ritual To Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* and *The Anthropology of Performance* are used to probe the boundaries of the Bobover celebration, which I see as a liminal activity, itself situated on the border between theatre and ritual.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹Gen. 17: 1-27.

¹⁰²Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*; idem., *The Anthropology of Performance*.

Over the years, Richard Schechner's theoretical writings on performance in works such as *Between Theatre and Anthropology* and *Performance Theory* have also theorized the nature of performative behavior and interrogated the boundaries between theatre and ritual.¹⁰³

Having established a general framework for the performative event, I turn to theatre theory to probe various elements of the performance. Steve Tillis' study, *Rethinking Folk Drama*, proposes a model that describes the folk theatre form.¹⁰⁴ The Bobover *purimshpil* is part of a theatrical tradition whose creative impulse is largely verbal, though non-literary. While this community's theatrical practice has developed over the course of a century, only in the last twenty-five years have scholars begun to write about it. Since the community itself does not value its *purimshpil* custom as evidence of a theatrical practice, they have not attempted to record the event. They do not save or publish scripts, costumes, settings, or scenery and make no attempt to preserve the details of the event for those interested in theatre. Over the last ten years, recordings

¹⁰³Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*; idem, *Performance Theory*.

¹⁰⁴Steve Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Drama*.

have been made of some productions for the enjoyment of community members. However, that theatre theorists now have a preserved document with which to work is of no official interest to the Bobover community. Bobover members are similar to many other groups of people who make folk theatre as an expression of community identity or ritual but do not feel the need to preserve it as a theatre artifact.

The difficulty of describing and even more, assessing the ephemeral theatrical artifact apart from its actual performance has historically posed an obstacle for scholars in the field.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, theorists have frequently concentrated on the easier-to-access, literary aspects of the theatrical product at the expense of the substantial, yet typically unrecorded non-literary elements. This emphasis has led to a valorizing of canonical over unauthorized works in theatre studies.¹⁰⁶ In fact, it has created a dearth of scholarly writing on folk theatre forms, which are, of course, more often than not, based in difficult-to-reconstruct non-verbal theatrical practices.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁶Marvin Carlson, "The Theory of History," in *The Performance of Power*, ed. Sue Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 272-279.

My study of the *purimshpil* is intended to help rectify this situation; providing an analysis of a contemporary folk theatre form while assessing the interplay between dramatic and performative dynamics. For the purposes of this discussion I define dramatic as the literary or script based verbal elements and performative as the entire text of a given production, including non-verbal elements. Importantly, I resist arbitrarily privileging one at the expense of the other. In this undertaking, I build on the work of those scholars who have begun to dismantle the literary bias in theatre studies by reconceptualizing the ways in which we think about drama and performance.¹⁰⁷

Tillis' book provides a model for assessing folk theatre on a global scale. Though widespread and prolific both historically and geographically, folk theatre has typically been undervalued by the academy. When viewed in conjunction with the wealth of critical work written in response to literary drama, the neglect is conspicuous. At best, it betrays the discomfort of scholars in

¹⁰⁷For a discussion of both sides of the drama/performance binary, See W. B. Worthen, "Disciplines of the Text/ Sites of Performance." *TDR* 39, 1 (Spring 1995):13-44. See also "Meanings of Drama and Theatre," in Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Theatre*, 65-92. For descriptions of the ways in which performative behavior is being theorized in contexts beyond theatre see, for example, Bauman, *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments*.

working with material that is by nature unfixed. At worst, it illustrates an academic bias against taking seriously a wealth of theatrical activity produced by those untutored in (what has come to be regarded as) authoritative (hence powerful) in theatre.

Tracing the development of the theoretical thinking in the fields of both drama and folklore, Tillis unravels the complicated dynamics inherent in each field that he believes have made it so difficult for theorists to articulate a conceptual schemata for the two together:

The discipline of folklore has historically been dominated by the study of oral texts, while that of drama has emphasized the study of literary texts, with both disciplines only recently venturing beyond textuality; and because, also, folk drama bears the academic stigma of not fitting comfortably into either one or the other discipline it remains regrettably true that folk drama wants even to this day a full-length analytical study.¹⁰⁸

Tillis argues that folk drama requires thoughtful discussion of unauthorized performance as one element of the complex and vital world created and illuminated by its theatrical tradition.¹⁰⁹ For the investigator of folk theatre forms, a willingness to tolerate and work

¹⁰⁸Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Drama*, xiv.

¹⁰⁹*ibid.*

seriously with unfixed—and sometimes unfinished—material is necessary.

According to Tillis, heretofore, descriptions of folk theatre have been partial and vague, if attempted at all. He demonstrates that folk theatre does in fact have a formal identity and delineates the necessary elements by which it can be adequately described. Citing the categories of context, situation, texts, and practices, Tillis shows how these elements come together to create a complete system of performance. By using this model to examine the *purimshpil*, I describe the theatrical event and situate it in its context as an expression of folk drama. My major interests are in ascertaining *how* meaning is created on the Bobover stage and *what* meaning is derived from the event. Both theatre and folklore—Tillis' major focal points—are crucial to generating meaning in the *purimshpil*.

A variety of theatre semiotics models are helpful in analyzing aspects of the production. Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, following the Prague semioticians in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, provides a general orientation and establishes the extraordinarily complex nature of the meanings

generated.¹¹⁰ By distinguishing between a number of fundamentally important elements of the plays, we can gain an understanding into the multilayered meaning engendered by the plays. Furthermore, both the written and performance texts create meaning. As Marco De Marinis has shown in his 1987 article “Dramaturgy and the Spectator,” the theatrical relationship between the text and performance text, audience, and actors, contributes significantly to meaning.¹¹¹

Constructing a model spectator using various techniques, community members, as both creators and consumers of the *purimshpil* regulate meanings within that theatre event to a large extent, even when they entertain unsanctioned or potentially subversive ideas on the stage.¹¹² Of crucial importance to interpreting the Bobover performance text is the impact of spatial arrangements on organizing spectators' experience. I use Marvin

¹¹⁰See respectively, Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980; reprint, New York: Routledge, 1991) and Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, eds., *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (1976; reprint, Cambridge: MIT, 1977).

¹¹¹Marco De Marinis, “Dramaturgy of the Spectator,” *TDR* 31:2 (Summer 1987), 100-114.

¹¹²The Bobover *rebe* plays the role of privileged spectator and performs many (though not all) of the roles that were played by the Renaissance court sovereign at the time that the “one point perspective became established in the theatre.” See Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1989), 137.

Carlson's chapter on interior spaces in *Places of Performance* to support my argument that significant meaning is created by the fact of the physical set-up of the event, regardless of the characteristics of the actual performance given there.¹¹³ Individual theorists from the group of Prague semioticians mentioned earlier address areas that are specifically relevant to the *purimshpil*. Petr Bogatyrev provides a useful discussion on characteristics of folk theatre that directly relates to Bobover performance practices.¹¹⁴ Jiri Veltruski's analysis of the hierarchy of stage props is useful in explaining how a most interesting prop—a live animal—generates meaning on the Bobover stage.¹¹⁵ Other individual articles in *Semiotics of Art* are used to address specific theatrical arenas such as scenery, lighting and costume.

In looking at a number of Bobover playlets, it becomes clear that these amateur playwrights use various theatre conventions that have also been used widely by other practitioners throughout theatre history. Manfred Pfister's *The Theory and Analysis of*

¹¹³Ibid., "Interior Space," 128-162.

¹¹⁴See Petr Bogatyrev, "Forms and Functions of Folk Theater," trans. B. Kochis, in *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Matejka, 51-56.

¹¹⁵See Jiri Veltruski, "The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices," trans. S. Larson, in *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Matejka, 118-127.

Drama enables me to decode a number of structural conventions of the Bobover plays and relate these to their counterparts in theatre history.¹¹⁶ For example, the Bobover practitioners typically stage scenes alternatively in the court and in the country as a way of signifying different cultural values of opposing societies; one of a number of conventional theatre practices that have been used ubiquitously by theatrical practitioners in many areas and geographical locales.

The Bobover *purimshpil* is a hybrid of high theatre, folk culture, Jewish and gentile history, religious ritual, orthodox reading practice, and the contemporary attitudes of a particular Hasidic in-group. The event is born of an impulse that acknowledges the enormous impact of Diaspora on Jewish life in every generation and every location. In fact, the biblical *Scroll of Esther*, which is the originating Purim narrative was itself, according to Talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin an expression of Jewish experience in Diaspora. Boyarin maintains that the text of Purim is that of “a nation apart and scattered, but maintaining its separate identity through practices that render it different from all other

¹¹⁶Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. John Halliday (1977;

people, thus arousing murderous hostility yet managing to survive nonetheless.”¹¹⁷ That theatrical practices have become one of the primary means by which Jewish communities, and in this case the Bobover, acknowledge their doubled identity in Diaspora speaks to the theatre’s ability to provide an effective point of entry for intercultural discourse. In fact, it is due to this very characteristic of theatre that anti-theatrical, ultra-orthodox communities (such as the Bobover) maintain a ban on theatrical activity. With this in mind, I undertake an examination of the *Scroll of Esther*, in commemoration of which, Jews play the role of gentile, for a day, the subject of the next chapter, to which I now turn.

reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).

¹¹⁷Boyarin, “Introduction,” *Poetics Today*, 4.

Chapter II: Gentile For a Day: Purimshpil History

And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar when the king's command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them into their power, *the opposite happened*, and the Jews got their enemies in their power (italics mine).

Esther 9:1

The biblical story of Esther is the seedbed out of which the *purimshpil* and subsequent expressions of Jewish theatre emerged.¹ According to Jewish tradition, Queen Esther was able to save the Jewish people of ancient Persia from annihilation due to a miraculous change of fortune. In direct response to this reversal and to the momentous events that ensued, religious laws calling for inversion and role-play were instituted in Judaism. The motif of antithetic outcomes (expressed in the *Book of Esther* by the phrase *the opposite happened*) provides the rationale for the spirit of license that obtains during the Purim festival.

¹Chone Shmeruk, "Emergence of the Yiddish Biblical Drama," in *Yiddish Biblical Plays, 1698-1750* (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1979), 20.

While the biblical *Book of Esther* is the acknowledged source of a particularly rich set of cultural practices, it is also a problematic and contested document. It has variously been regarded as historical, mythological, of Jewish, and of pagan origin. I believe the complex relationship between the book's creation and its reception (over time) is responsible for the extraordinarily verdant cultural practices it has engendered. This chapter, therefore, explores the biblical Esther tale in order to illustrate the ways in which its history, internal themes, and audience reception have come together to bring about the highly theatrical Purim traditions with which it is associated.

Moreover, this chapter will demonstrate that Purim laws and traditions create a world of symbols whose ultimate purpose is to draw distinctions between the observant Jew and the Other. While the Bobover *purimshpil* is my main area of focus, this amateur folk play is one of a number of customs that comprise the Purim observance in this Hasidic community. As in any other cultural system, a host of elements come together to create the symbolic realm. However, the foundation of the cultural practices I am concerned with is the biblical *Book of Esther*,

where I begin my study.

The *Book of Esther* describes the miraculous release of the Jews of ancient Persia from the threat of destruction. As told, Haman, the villainous advisor to King Ahasuerus, plotted to rid the kingdom of Jews. Mordecai, the ultimate hero of the tale, adroitly circumvented the plan. He called on his cousin, the queen (who, unbeknownst to her husband, was a Jewish woman) to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. Risking her life, Queen Esther approached the king. This deed caused a chain of events which, in turn, brought about the symmetrical reversal of Haman's plan, resulting in the destruction of Haman's own family and people at the hands of the Jews. To mark the change in fortune, Mordecai instituted the festival of Purim. On this holiday, Jews were enjoined to give gifts to the poor, to send portions (of food) to one another, and to drink until they become so intoxicated they could not tell the difference between the phrases "blessed be Mordecai" and "cursed be Haman."²

The events recorded in the Scroll of Esther precipitated a body

²Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah*, 51.

of practice in which Jews symbolically turned the world inside out, engaging in reversals of generally accepted laws and customs.³ Hence, theatrical behavior such as wearing costumes and playing roles found legitimate and regularized expression in Jewish tradition. Before the widespread acceptance of Purim customs, these pastimes had been at most, marginal activities.⁴ In fact, Purim observance allows the Jew to deliberately engage in secular activities forbidden on other days. The theatrical nature of these activities, in turn, lead to the *purimshpil* and to the various other performative activities under consideration here. The process of role playing that results affords the celebrant an opportunity to examine aspects of his or her everyday life anew from a perspective of distance.

During Purim celebrations, a sense of psychic dissonance is created by playing the role of Other, since the enacting celebrant can never fully elide the core self. Therefore, the personification

³“The book of Esther is one of the Five Scrolls, each of which is read on a Jewish holiday (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Qohelet [= Ecclesiastes], and Esther). In Hebrew, Esther is usually called simply Hamegillah, “the Scroll”—i.e., the scroll *par excellence*.” Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 2.

⁴Israel Abrahams, “The Jews and the Theatre,” in *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (1896; reprint, New York: Meridian Books, 1961), 251-259.

of Other is also, on some level an expression of self. For individual celebrants, Purim laws and traditions encourage a sense of duality. On one hand, observant community members are bound by Jewish laws. On the other, they are required to transgress (a number of) those laws in the service of commemorating an event in Jewish history.

Purim performances, which include folk theatricals on biblical and historical themes, encourage participants and spectators to consider their own identity. For even when enacting or viewing representations of the Other (i.e. the gentile) or when rendering or witnessing imitations of Jewish characters, community members are still, at core, their Jewish selves. This situation creates a particularly rich field for the investigation of notions about culture; it provides a picture of the community's perceptions of those others and those Jews whom they are representing. The perspective of distance created by this exercise prompts celebrants to express, reflect (and reflect on) notions about their culture and the culture of others.

Biblical stories provide a historical account of the experience of the Jewish people and are received as such by traditional

Judaism. However, a historiographic reading of the bible reveals gaps in documentation that provide clues to the Jewish perception of the role of history in Judaism. Clearly, the Hebrew bible does not record and account for every occurrence in the Jewish people's long history, but rather its numerous authors and compilers used some process to select material for inclusion. While the particular modes by which biblical subject matter was selected are beyond the scope of this study, the gaps and unmarked elements provide important information about the authors'—and the Jewish community's—concerns and preoccupations at the time of the writing and beyond. In the case of the Scroll of Esther, textual erasures are an integral part of the biblical story and can be read, along with the text, as clues to the meaning of the whole.

In order to place Esther's tale and its relation to the Purim festival in its proper perspective it will be useful to examine the Jewish view of history, and specifically, the function of the Hebrew bible in Judaism. Just as visual perspective in the theatre greatly affects a viewer's experience of a performance, so too, does the Jewish celebrant's attitude toward the biblical subject

matter of each holiday foster the appropriate experience of the occasion. The particular function of history in Judaism bears a direct impact on the ways in which Jewish community members understand their community and its holidays. On one hand, fissures in historical documentation may prevent the Hebrew bible from standing alone as modern day historiography. At the same time, Jewish history, when perceived from a perspective of aesthetic distance, makes way for a viscerally palpable religious experience of Jewishness for the faithful. Thus to comprehend the *purimshpil* I would like to consider the ways in which the Jewish community makes sense of its own history and that of others. This basis will also lay the groundwork for understanding the specific role of the biblical story of Esther in engendering the *purimshpil*, a ritual so theatrical in nature, that it cannot properly be considered apart from the theatrical life that gives to it such unmistakable vitality.

I argue that Judaism employs personal and communal memory as a means to provide members of the faith with access to a rich store of experiences always geared to present-day Jewish observance. History, or more specifically, memory, provides for

the symbolic re-experiencing of pivotal events in Jewish life, thereby making the Jewish sense of reality immediate and vital for present day community members. In addition, memory, as engendered by Judaism, imbues congregants with a deep sense of group identification. Historiography, particularly when defined as the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, has not traditionally been valued by religious Judaism. Furthermore, non-Jewish history, except when impinging on Jewish religious experience, has always been of relatively slight importance in the scheme of life for the observant Jew. Jewish collective experience, as posited in the Bible, and possibly in all periods except that of our own, is regarded by Judaism in a paradoxically ahistorical manner.

In his volume *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi claims that history in Judaism has always functioned not as “a series of facts to be contemplated at a distance, but a series of situations into which one could existentially be drawn.”⁵ For example, Yerushalmi cites the

⁵Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 44.

Passover *Seder*⁶ as the “quintessential exercise in Jewish group memory.”⁷ The custom of reading the *Haggadah* (at the festive table) with its ritualized retelling of the story of Jewish slavery, deliverance, and redemption serves to remind participants of their history. Even more importantly, however, the custom functions to merge (symbolically) that history with the present to give Jews a sense of having again lived those ancient events. Passover observance, which requires that each person regard himself as though he had personally been delivered out of slavery in Egypt, is facilitated by the custom of the retelling. (In fact, the word *Haggadah* comes from the root of the Hebrew word *aggada*, or legend.)

Similarly, the *Book of Esther*, as the authorizing text of the Purim holiday, creates a relatively non-didactic frame enabling participants to imagine themselves as proxies for their ancestors. Through annual Purim laws such as hearing a reading of the *Scroll of Esther* and rituals such as donning costumes, celebrants learn, rehearse, enact, and perpetuate the collective perception of

⁶Defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 2nd ed., under “Seder,” as “a term most commonly used for the home service on the first night of Passover.”

⁷Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 45.

a crucial (and often conflicted) component of Jewish historical experience—living alongside gentiles in the Diaspora. Indeed, the *Book of Esther* functions as the quintessential text of Jewish life in dispersion.⁸ While individual life experiences may vary from country to country and period to period, the precariousness of life in Diaspora has continually emerged across continents and generations as central to the Jewish experience.

Purim ritual makes this overarching historical theme palpable to the community regardless of the particular facts of any given era. In biblical scholar Jon D. Levinson's view of the *Book of Esther*, "the biblical sources are embellishing or creating facts in the service of the exquisite narratives rather than conveying accurate data in the service of dry empirical history."⁹ Thus, he views the *Book of Esther* as a historical novella, and asserts that its veracity may be judged within the context of literature rather than by the standards of historiography.¹⁰

⁸Overwhelmingly, Esther studies scholars affirm Purim as the holiday of the Diaspora. For a particularly incisive discussion of Diaspora's relationship to Purim, see Daniel Boyarin, "Introduction: Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judaism--Theorizing Diaspora," *Poetics Today* 15:1 (Spring 1994): 1-8.

⁹Jon D. Levinson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 25.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

Ironically, it may be a sense of distance from the facts of Jewish history achieved by the ritualized expression of historical memory that enables participants to achieve an intense and immediate experience of Judaism in their lives. Performances of identity (whether given on a theatrical stage or around a festive table) in Joseph Roach's formulation, serve to recreate and reproduce culture.¹¹ However, the cultures that produce the performances are themselves subject to the process of surrogation:

Selective memory requires public enactments of forgetting, either to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed.¹²

Roach goes on to assert that performances are laden with "the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that were rejected and, even more invisibly, those that have succeeded."¹³

The Purim story is the paradigmatic recitation of the traditional Jewish view of life in Diaspora. Purim performances are

¹¹Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University, 1996), 2.

¹²*Ibid.*, 3.

¹³*Ibid.*, 5.

enactments of those cycles of doom to deliverance that are central to Jewish identity.

A vignette from a typical amateur folk theatrical, published by a synagogue in 1938, illustrates the way in which the ancient story of Purim expresses a contemporary Jewish view of life.

Speaking of the Jew, a character named "the historian" proclaims:

Every Purim time, celebrated with gaiety and dance, and song and mask, brought back his courage in the face of calamity--courage with which he met those who slandered the Jew and sought his ruin, as when in *Russia, Germany and even in France* anti-Semitism raised its ugly head. The Jew learned at Purim time to laugh--to laugh at Hamans. Hamans, he learned, disappeared, but Jewish life went on. Echoing down the ages rang his laughter, especially at Purim time (*italics mine*).¹⁴

The author of this scene (which is entitled 'The Purim Ball') used the holiday as a metaphor to call attention to the rabid anti-Semitism on the rampage in Europe at the time of his writing. A decade later, the deaths of millions of Jews in Hitler's concentration camps confirmed again the Jewish collective experience of the uncertain and often perilous nature of life as a

¹⁴Mignon L. Rubenovitz, "The Miracle of the Ages," in *The Light of the Centuries and Other Historical Dramas* (Boston: Sisterhood of Temple Mishkan Tefila, 1938), 96-97.

guest in the gentiles' land. One might look at these words today and admire the author's prescience. Indeed, Hitler was defeated and Jewish life has since flourished, particularly in the United States and Israel. Yet this playwright's message is as old as the biblical Esther story, made visceral annually during public readings of the Scroll and by other Purim rituals.

In Victor Turner's conception, the state of liminality characterizes the entire ritual process, whose acts are "performed in privileged spaces and times, set off from the periods and areas reserved for work, food and sleep."¹⁵ Turner argues that "liminality and the phenomena of liminality dissolve all factual and commonsense systems into their components and play with them in ways never found in nature or in custom, at least at the level of direct perception."¹⁶ The Jewish conception of memory privileges personal identification with Jewish historical events over documentation *per se* of the circumstances of Jewish existence. As stated by Yerushalmi, "the collective memory is transmitted more actively through ritual than through

¹⁵Victor Turner, "Ritual, Drama, Carnival, Film and Spectacle in Cultural Performance," in *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 25.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

chronicle.”¹⁷ Ritualized symbolic enactments of Jewish memory create a liminal space, a separation from the quotidian world. The liminal state enables the celebrant to discern and relate to events in Jewish history on an existential level.

The repeated recitation of facts of Jewish history within the frame of ritual turns what religious Judaism views as mere chronological facts of history into a reflexive arena in which the participant can work with and through the material of group identity.¹⁸ Thus, Jewish memory functions as one of Turner’s “reflexive genres,” in which “the work of sustaining cherished social and cultural principles and forms, and also of turning them upside down and examining them by various metalanguages”¹⁹ can be undertaken.

Purim makes possible precisely this form of spiritual work. On this holiday only, custom and law prescribe an overturning of norms according to which the faithful may play the role of those who are Other to Judaism. In so doing, they jest symbolically

¹⁷Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 15.

¹⁸Turner points out that in many societies, ritual is described as work. I note that in Hebrew the word for both work and religious worship is *avodah*. See Turner, *Anthropology*, 26.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

with their own roles, behaving toward cherished norms with an air of levity and irreverence. Purim customs are performance rituals by which individuals actively symbolize the antithetical outcomes that are extolled in the *Book of Esther*. The process of performing these rituals gives the observant a temporary sense of distance from his or her normative behavior. As such, Judaism acknowledges that both distance and proximity have their appropriate place in the scheme of life for the observant Jew.

Apparently, the biblical Hebrews were also cognizant of the impact of spatial relationships on the nature of experience. The following excerpt from the *Book of Exodus* demonstrates that Moses' fellow travelers were sensitive to proxemics in relation to God:

All the people witnessed the thunder and lightening, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. "You speak to us, they said to Moses, and we will obey; but let God not speak to us, lest we die." Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

Ex. 20:15-18

The last line from the above passage from the Exodus story is curious. Given the opportunity to personally experience the God in whom they believe, the Israelites preferred to stand back and have their knowledge of the deity mediated by Moses. A stutterer, Moses was chosen by God to act as His factotum. As such, he had the most immediate and repeated contact with Him. As God's spokesman, Moses liberated the people from Pharaoh's Egypt. Ironically, Moses' speech impediment originally caused him to assume the role of God's agent only reluctantly. In one sense, his slow speech functioned as a distancing device from the role of God's spokesman.²⁰ Yet, as God's instrument, Moses led his people through the wilderness to the threshold of the Promised Land.

Nevertheless, at the end of the journey to Canaan, Moses was punished for breaking the tablets of the law. God denied His servant entrance to the land of milk and honey. Possibly, Moses' proximity to God during the Exodus had supplanted his requisite fear of God. Thus, he was permitted to see the Promised Land only from afar. On the other hand, the people, who had asked

²⁰Exodus, 4:10-16.

not to experience the godhead firsthand but wished to take directives from Moses instead, were granted the privilege of entering the land. Apparently, their distance from God helped to maintain their awe of Him. Not surprisingly, the appropriate proximity of the observant Jew to those people and events within and outside of his or her community (in fact to all things in the world) is a central motif in Jewish culture.

The passage (and here I am referring to both the verses of writing above and to the Israelites' journey through the wilderness) serves as a metaphor for the relationship of traditional Judaism to history and to the nature of the biblical history recorded and preserved for posterity. In addition, it serves to frame the ways in which distance and proximity to the historical facts of Esther's story impinge on the spiritual work done by celebrants during the Purim holiday. First, Esther's tale makes the faithful keenly aware of their precarious place as part of a Diaspora community living on the margins of a host country.

Indeed, one moral of Esther's tale—made palpable by the public, ritualized reading of the scroll during the holiday—is that a disaster similar to that which befell the heroine's people in

Persia can easily occur to Jewish people today. However, the story requires that Jewish sadness change to joy as the foes are overcome—thus, an event to mourn becomes a cause for revelry. Celebrants do not necessarily need to know the actual facts of Persian Jewish history in order to do the spiritual work required: that is, through a series of role-plays and inversions, to stand in for their ancestors, thereby symbolically re-experiencing the threat of annihilation and ultimate deliverance from doom.

In the Esther narrative, deliverance comes when the Jews are granted the privilege of defending themselves. A translation of the Esther scroll in a children's book issued by an ultra-orthodox publishing house puts it succinctly:

The letters said that the king had given permission for the Jews of every single city to join together and defend themselves: to destroy, to kill, and to wipe out the entire army -- along with their wives and children -- of any nation or country that wants to hurt them; and the Jews could take their enemies' property. All this should happen on the same day in all the countries of Achashveirosh, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.²¹

²¹Rabbi Nosson Scherman with Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, trans., and Rabbi Avie Gold, ed., *Artscroll Youth Megillah* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1988), 39.

Revealingly, the Jews had only one day to take up arms against—and end—their sea of Persian troubles.

This brings to mind the performance of Purim revenge, a troubling aspect of Purim ritual evidenced mainly in Christian Europe. Historian Elliot Horowitz traces the perpetration of Purim violence over a number of centuries and its subsequent interpretation by scholars, both Jewish and gentile.²² There can be no doubt that beginning in ancient Judaism until today, ritualized acts of aggression have been performed, at times, in association with Purim and that in many cases, hostility has been an underlying Purim theme. Horowitz demonstrates that historians have suppressed or disclosed such acts and knowledge according to their own proclivities and with regard to the tenor of the time in which they wrote.²³ Clearly, however, Purim violence occurred, often laden with anti-Christian hostility either in fact or merely in the imagination of the surrounding community.

²²Elliot Horowitz. "The Rite to Be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence," *Poetics Today* 15:1 (Spring 1994): 9-54.

²³I speculate that a great many Jews today, and perhaps the majority who are secular, are not aware of this admittedly controversial aspect of Purim theology.

According to Horowitz, the festival was a day when Jews could put “aside (for one day), in their traditional Purim audacity, their fear of Christianity.”²⁴ Discussing an edict of Theodosius II in 408, which banned Jews from burning Haman in effigy,²⁵ Horowitz explores the extent to which that ritual was practiced during the Middle Ages. He concludes, “the utilization of Purim as an opportunity to settle accounts. . . under the cover of jocular festivity is a phenomenon which recurred in the Middle Ages with greater frequency than has been realized.”²⁶

In our own day, we need only recall Feb. 25, 1994, the Purim massacre. American-born extremist and medical doctor Baruch Goldstein gunned down 30 Arabs at prayer at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, Judaism’s second holiest site.²⁷ The followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane interviewed at Goldstein’s funeral claimed they were not surprised he chose Purim as the day of the massacre. In the words of the reporter who interviewed them, they believed he “wasn’t killing innocent men

²⁴Ibid., 27.

²⁵Ibid., 25.

²⁶Ibid., 29.

²⁷Jews and Moslems share this shrine, each using different parts of the building at different times of the day. See Yossi Klein Halevi, “Kahane’s Murderous Legacy,” *Jerusalem Report*, 16 March 1994, 12-18.

at prayer but Haman and Hitler and Arafat, sanctifying God's name by avenging Amalek."²⁸ It is worthwhile to note that the perceived indignities ostensibly perpetrated on the Jews by Arabs praying at the site on the days leading to the massacre may well have fueled Goldstein's rage.

My own view of the massacre, Kahanist ideology notwithstanding, is that Goldstein used Purim as a justification to vent his hostility, born not in the days of Haman in Persia but in his own day and in his own community. As an observant Jew, Goldstein may well have believed he had but one day, during the holiday of Purim, in which to play the role of Other, one day to psychologically distance himself from his own perceived role as Jew. In my estimation, he allowed himself to take revenge because of his own apparent belief in the ideas of Jew as victim and gentile as victimizer, two roles he believed could be reversed on Purim.

In an article entitled "The Semiotics of Purim," Harold Fisch argues that the festival's brief duration provides only enough

²⁸Ibid. Haman of the Esther story was a descendant of Amalek. Esther, 3:1. For an explanation of the reasons Jewish tradition cursed Amalek to oblivion, see Fox. *Character and Ideology*, 42.

time to symbolize the carnivalesque spirit, rather than to truly adopt the attitudes of other members of the societies within which Jewish people live. Fisch asserts that Purim license functions as a symbol of carnival, more so than a frame for the actual adoption of the carnivalesque spirit. Similarly, in their book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have demonstrated that the medieval Jew refrained from participation in the carnival and was therefore, seen by the dominant culture as the antithesis of the carnivalesque:

Hatred against the Jews at carnival time was further motivated by their potential association with the forces of Lenten abstinence, the traditional enemy of carnival. Feasting came before fasting, shroving before shricing, carnival before Lent. In all these pairings it was the second of each which was the officially dominant one. . .

But if Lent's triumphant defeat of carnival could not be stopped, the subordinate and vulnerable Jew *could* be derided and defeated, and the carnival crowd could displace the anger of its defeat by Lent onto the Lenten Jew, seen as pig-hating, parsimonious, anti-festive. . . .²⁹

The Jewish adoption of carnivalesque notions during Purim functions, in the view of Harold Fisch, to emphasize Jewish

²⁹Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 54-55.

difference from the Others who are the truly carnivalesque revelers. "The carnivalesque mode. . . is being adopted and deconstructed at the same time."³⁰ For Fisch, the target of Purim laughter is that same gentile culture whose customs the Jew temporarily adopts during the holiday, creating a present-day symbolic inversion of the Jewish historical experience of carnival. He avers, "We are no more taking part in a true Carnival than the celebrants at the seder table take part in the Exodus from Egypt. . . We are again in the realm of semiotics."³¹ It is interesting to note in this context, that the Purim feasting and revelry is preceded by the Fast of Esther, yet another figurative inversion of the poetics of Medieval carnival. Indeed, it is in this symbolic vein that the Purim festival acts on participants, thereby inculcating cultural values in the observant.

In the traditional Jewish conception, history is seen as a mere byway to the eventual coming of the Messiah and deliverance of the people. In fact, in Hebrew, the word for Jewish Law—*Halakha*—is closely related to the word for path. The

³⁰Harold Fisch, "Semiotics of Purim," *Poetics Today* 15.1 (Spring 1994): 68-69.

³¹*Ibid.*, 69.

manner in which observant Jews are required to live, including those events they are commanded to remember, function as a route to the eternal. Thus, the vicissitudes of history whether Jewish or non-Jewish, are subordinate to those elements of group memory that guide the path to the numinous. Clearly, the ritualized reading of the *Scroll of Esther*, only one of the numerous rituals and traditions associated with the holiday, creates an existential present day experience of identification for the celebrant. The celebratory attitude of the festival is expressed in a manner that would be highly inappropriate on any other day. For example, pandemonium ensues in the synagogue as congregants stamp their feet, hiss, and twirl noisemakers at the mere (and frequent) mention of the name of the hated villain Haman during the reading of the scroll. Celebrants are called to remember a historical event by various rituals of collective memory; yet, the history is remembered primarily in service of the future. Walter Benjamin's teleological view of history springs forth from this Jewish worldview. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin differentiates between Historicism, which he views as the recording of facts to fill time, and Materialistic

Historiography, which is armed with a “revolutionary chance in the fight for an oppressed past.”³² Benjamin affirms,

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated by from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own conception of the present era has formed with a definite earlier one. *Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time* (italics mine).³³

Benjamin's view of history, referred to as "Jewish messianism" in an essay by Jonathan Boyarin on Jewish memory,³⁴ is precisely the perspective taken by the observant in his or her regard of the biblical book of Esther.

Purim rituals remind the faithful that their lot in Diaspora is subject to the whims of the dominant society. The very name Purim—the Persian word for lots—recalls Haman’s act of casting

³²Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books 1968), 262-263.

³³*Ibid.*, 263.

³⁴Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 34.

lots to decide the most propitious day for exterminating the Persian Jews. Yet, religious Judaism affirms that God has repeatedly redeemed the Jewish people in times of crisis. Thus, Purim celebrations create 'a time of now' in which faith is affirmed; the festival is 'shot through with chips of Messianic time.'

In *Zakhor*, Yerushalmi argues that historiography *per se* was traditionally devalued by the Jewish community.³⁵ Memory, rather than history, was the operative mode by which the community regarded itself. The very title *Zakhor* (which in Hebrew means remember) highlights the importance of memory to Jewish self-understanding. Indeed, the author cites multiple verses in which the Bible admonishes Jews to remember particular events of their history. Yet in the Jewish conception, according to Yerushalmi memory has primarily a religious aim:

The present historical moment possesses little independent value. It achieved meaning and reality only by subverting itself, when, through the repetition of a ritual or the recitation or re-enactment of a myth, historical time is periodically shattered and one can experience again, if only briefly, the true time of the origins and archetypes.³⁶

³⁵Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 66-71.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 7.

So too, the biblical Esther story creates a unique and immediate relationship between celebrants and the mythic subject matter of the Purim festival (and its attendant custom, the *purimshpil*).

Certainly, when considering the biblical Esther story as the historical impetus for a theatrical event, we will see that the historiographical facts are less essential than the rituals which enable the participants to experience the mythic themes of the Purim story in their own lives, in the present day. In fact, the Sabbath before Purim is known as Sabbath *Zakhor*. During the service on this Sabbath, congregants read a passage from Deuteronomy in which they are commanded to remember the trials foisted on them by their enemy Amalek during the Exodus from Egypt.³⁷ Perhaps the words of biblical scholar Michael Fox capture best the paradox of Purim and the seemingly contradictory requirements posed by accepting the truth of the *Book of Esther*.

³⁷Theodore H. Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* (New York: Henry Schulman, Inc., 1950), 79.

We must therefore balance two distinct perspectives. As critical readers, viewing the text as an object from a deliberate distance, we can recognize the book as fiction and analyze it in those terms, while as immediate readers, giving ourselves over to the book's own terms, we can respond to its realities—those it creates and those it reflects—as if they were our own. In one sense, they are: in a fundamental way the legend is very true to history. Its story is an epitome of numerous occasions on which Jewish communities were delivered from threats to their existence.³⁸

The celebrant, therefore, who can incorporate both the exuberant mirth and the grave admonition offered by Purim rituals into his or her immediate experience of the festival will have done the spiritual work required.

The biblical story of Esther posits itself as a historical document. The opening verses frame the text as a chronicle of authentic events from the past. The story begins with an identification of the time of the events that are to be recounted. "It happened in the days of Ahasuerus--that Ahasuerus who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Nubia."³⁹ The writer takes pains throughout to maintain the sensibility that he is an archivist recording events for posterity. Yet, many of the facts recounted strain credulity. Many

³⁸Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 138-139.

circumstances in the biblical narrative are not corroborated by what is known of the ancient Persian court. Yet, the penultimate chapter of the story includes Esther's request that the words of the Purim story be acted upon by the Jews and accepted as part of the biblical canon. The author then proclaims that the greatness of the hero Mordecai was inscribed in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia.⁴⁰

Talmudic, and thus, ultra-orthodox Judaism accepts the events depicted in Esther's scroll as factual.⁴¹ Many historians believe that some tantalizing nugget of historical fact may well be embedded in the Purim story.⁴² Thus, they have followed the circuitous routes through ancient Persian and Jewish history in an attempt to corroborate the biblical story with external evidence. No historian has satisfactorily proved the veracity of

³⁹ Esther 1:1. Biblical quotations are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 9:29-10:2.

⁴¹Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1991), 254.

⁴²N.S. Doniach, *Purim or the Feast of Esther: An Historical Study*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 28. See also Solomon Grayzel, "The Origin of Purim," in *The Purim Anthology*, ed. Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949), 3-13. See also J. Stafford Wright, "The Historicity of the Book of Esther," in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne (Waco, TX: Word Inc. 1970), 37-47.

the events described in the *Book of Esther*.⁺³ Scholars have built historical theories around traces of archeological, historical, linguistic, and literary evidence; all are partially plausible, none are completely credible.

Scholars have also attempted to authenticate the story by establishing authorship. Alas, evidence in this domain is incomplete as well. Despite the fact that many Persian and no Greek words are found in Esther's scroll, most scholars conjecture the book was written by a Hellenized Jew during the early Greek period (c. 200 BCE).⁺⁴ In this view, the author was close enough to the events and culture described to paint a picture with convincing historical detail, though not with historical accuracy *per se*. Writing a novella, he may have deliberately chosen to place his story in a period far removed from his own, yet still giving the narrative a historical sensibility that readers would not challenge.

Many biblical experts claim the writing style and the order of

⁺³For a concise discussion of arguments (both pro and con) relevant to historicity in the biblical narrative, see Fox, "Historicity and Dating," in *Character and Ideology*, 131-140.

⁺⁴Davies, *History of Judaism*, 366. See also popular texts such as Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentis Hall, 1980), 152.

events class the book as a creation of artistic imagination rather than the historical reportage it purports to be.⁴⁵ In fact, many readers have marveled at the great skill with which the author constructed a profoundly dramatic work. A number of biblical scholars, most notably, Shemaryahu Talmon, have pointed out within the tale elements of wisdom literature⁴⁶ that correspond to other such biblical writing.⁴⁷ Others have argued persuasively for various classifications: historical novella, romance, and fairy tale.⁴⁸ In short, the story is so well constructed that many feel it must be regarded chiefly as a literary and artistic document. The characterization of biblical scholar Jack Sasson makes the point:

In Esther, unsubtle villains meet with brutal fates; proud

⁴⁵See, for example, W. Lee Humphreys, "The Story of Esther and Mordecai: An Early Jewish Novella," in *Saga Legend Tale Novella Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*, Edited by George W. Coats (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 97-113.

⁴⁶Defined as "a term for the Jewish philosophical writings of the pre-Christian era," in the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 4th ed., under "wisdom." See also Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition*, 32.

⁴⁷Shemaryahu Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," in *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press of the Hebrew University, 1993), 255-290.

⁴⁸For a concise review of genre research on Esther, see Timothy S. Laniak, "Introduction" in *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1998), 2-34. See also Jack M. Sasson, "Esther," in *Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987), 335-342.

partisans are fully vindicated; lovely heroines retain the affection of all; and stolid, dim-witted monarchs are there to be used by all.⁴⁹

In fact, it may be due to the formulaic quality of the story that it lends itself so perfectly to dramatization and has thus remained important to the consciousness of every generation since its inception.

Some thinkers posit that the tale emerged from a historical event that became mythologized over time. In this view, an ancient Jewish victory of some sort may have originally been celebrated in the manner of the local population. Eventually, Jewish elements became merged with the stories and customs of the wider culture. Similarly, a number of scholars posit Purim to be a Judaized version of what was at root a pagan celebration.⁵⁰ They argue, for example, that the names Esther and Mordecai correspond to the Babylonian gods Ishtar and Marduk.⁵¹ In the same vein, some have suggested that ancient Persian New Year's celebrations, consisting of customs such as the sending of gifts, may have been the impetus for similar traditions (such as the

⁴⁹Ibid., 341.

⁵⁰Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah*, 78.

⁵¹Ibid., 34. See also Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith*, 109.

sending of portions of food) in the Jewish celebration of Purim.

Other influences may have included the fool kings of the Babylonian or Persian spring carnivals. During Purim, these figures are reflected in the customary mock rabbis and their jovial role in the festivities.⁵² In these analyses, the author is assumed to have been a person living well after the events described, who was never the less familiar with the customs and lifestyle of both the ancient Persian court and the minority Jewish community in its domain. The author of the *Book of Esther* used these elements to fashion a wholly new, yet seemingly historic tale whose purpose may have been to help Jewish communities living in the Diaspora accept and live with the vicissitudes of life as a marginal and often endangered group in the midst of the wider culture. In the process, he created a text that so affected the human psyche that generation after generation of Jews and gentiles have read, cherished, and celebrated the text, often finding in it a morality tale for their own group.⁵³ Despite the debate over authorship and origin of

⁵²Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, 260.

⁵³Note Lope de Vega's *!a Hermosa Esther* (c.1621), the anonymous English interlude, *Godly Queen Hester* (c. 1527), and the recently published *Esther's*

the seminal story, the Jewish holiday detailed in Esther's scroll was eventually accepted, first by the folk and later by the religious authorities.⁵⁴

Recently, scholars have applied theories from the fields of cultural and feminist studies to the *Book of Esther*, resulting in new interpretations of the material.⁵⁵ In *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*, biblical scholar Timothy Beal has demonstrated that meaning is generated by what is "written out" of the *Book of Esther* alongside those elements included in the text. In "Writing Out, I," an analysis of the first chapter of the biblical book, Beal asserts that the absence of Vashti, the "other woman" in Esther's story, contributes greatly to the significance of the entire biblical narrative.⁵⁶

Chapter one sets the tale in the ancient city of Susa, introduces King Ahasuerus and his advisors, and refers to the

Story, aimed at a young female audience in the popular market, the first two with a Christian and the latter with a Jewish interpretation of the subject.

⁵⁴According to Jewish legend, the festival was accepted first from "below" and then from "above." Louis Ginzberg, *Bible Times and Characters, from Joshua to Esther*, vol. 4 of *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 448

⁵⁵See Daniel Boyarin, "Introduction," 1-8. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1990, 75-82.

⁵⁶Timothy K. Beal, "Writing Out, I," in *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 15-28.

queen, Vashti. The scene opens on a lavish party given by the king for his court and mentions a concurrent party given by Queen Vashti for women in another area of the palace. Shortly after the scene is set, the king summons the queen to appear and display her extraordinary beauty for the court. Vashti refuses. Consequently, she is legally banished from the king's sight and eliminated from the story of Esther. Indeed, when Vashti is mentioned again (in absentia), she is remembered only for her refusal to appear before the king.

The memory of the queen's refusal and its implications for the king's subjects sets the rest of the story in motion. Vashti must be banished by law so that other women in the kingdom will learn by example never to go against the husband's will. In Beal's interpretation, she is exiled from the court in order to assert male privilege in the king's house and by extension, in all houses in the land.⁵⁷ Ironically, Vashti never appears in the narrative in first person; she is only called to mind by other characters. Yet, the memory of her act and its implied threat to male dominance provides the impetus for the king to replace her. Holding a

⁵⁷Ibid., 25. See also Laniak, "Unexpected Favor in the Gentile Court," in *Shame and Honor*, 35-69.

beauty pageant to find an even more comely woman to surpass Vashti, the king selects Esther. By the end of chapter two in the biblical narrative, the new queen is fully ensconced in the palace and in her role.

At this point, the main events of the *Book of Esther* begin to unfold. After chapter two, Vashti is never mentioned again. Yet, the memory of Vashti's refusal to appear before the king can never be fully erased. Read not as an insignificant preamble to the real story, but as vital to the gender dynamic underlying it, Vashti's refusal haunts Esther's story. Interpretation of the *Book of Esther* is problematized by reading what is ostensibly erased from the text along side what is written into the narrative. In Beal's words, "Chapter I remains in memory of her [Vashti], traced with the spectral presence-by-absence of this other woman [Vashti, again]."⁵⁸ From the moment Esther steps into Vashti's place until the end of the story and beyond, a trace of the former queen remains.⁵⁹

Beal goes on to similarly unravel the next chapter of the

⁵⁸Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 25.

⁵⁹In Theatre Company Jerusalem's solo performance piece *Esther*, Vashti is depicted as one of the many facets of Queen Esther's psyche. See Gabriella

Book of Esther, using both the text and its interstices to reveal the problematics of ethnic identity embedded in the characters of Esther and her cousin Mordecai.⁶⁰ The author's elegant and thoughtful analysis complicates a text that has been offered to countless Jewish school children as a mere fairy tale whose moral of Jewish survival is paramount. Beal is one of a number of cultural studies theorists who have recently argued that the *Book of Esther* can now be read in ways not previously available.⁶¹ As such, this biblical book, read anew, can also be used to understand the foundations of performances of cultural identity that are connected to the narrative.

The Purim festival and its accompanying customs have been affected by factors outside Judaism that have contributed generously to its character as a special day in the calendar. For example, similar festival traditions practiced in Europe in the Middle Ages signified by buffoon kings and inversions are

Lev, "Esther," video recording of a performance presented at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York, March 3, 1998.

⁶⁰Beal, "Palimpsest," in *The Book of Hiding*, 29-39.

⁶¹ See also, for example, Mieke Bal, "Lots of Writing," *Poetics Today* 15:1 (Spring 1994): 89-114.

thought to have lent shape to Purim traditions.⁶² A number of other elements make the Purim holiday unlike any other special day in the Jewish calendar. As noted, Purim is the only holiday not rooted in the land of Israel and, unlike other books of the bible, Esther's scroll bears no mention of the name of God.⁶³ During the festival, observant Jews are instructed to act in ways that invert their normal code of behavior. Numerous activities forbidden on regular days are allowed on days of the festival. Cross-dressing, drinking until drunk, merrymaking in place of study, and the enacting of pageants and plays are some ways in which the normative Jewish male world is set topsy-turvy on Purim. In fact, these activities would be considered transgressive if not heretical on regular days. For women Purim requires changes in normative behavior as well. Since the heroine of the Esther tale is a female, women are required to hear the reading of the scroll.

Ultra-orthodox Judaism does not embrace theatre—in fact,

⁶² Natalie Zemon Davis, "Rabelais Among the Censors (1540's, 1540's)," *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990): 18. See also Ahuva Belkin, "'Habit De Fou' in Purim Spiel?" *Assaph: Studies in Theatre* 2 (Section C 1985): 40.

⁶³ Monford Harris, "Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order," *Judaism* 102 (Spring 1977) : 165. See also Wisse, "A Purim Homily," *Commentary* 93 (May 1992): 53.

there are Talmudic and rabbinical injunctions against it.⁶⁴ As recently as 1993, when a minor earth quake rocked parts of Israel, the Jerusalem based, ultra-orthodox newspaper *Peg of the Faithful* published the following pronouncement: "When the Holy One looks at the earth and sees theatres, the earth shakes."⁶⁵

Certainly, the theatrical spirit that prevails during Purim is a divergence from the typical decorum in religious Judaism. Yet it is precisely this deviation which gives the holiday its distinctive function and ambiance. Purim is the only holiday during which some otherwise taboo ideas can be evoked, if not entertained. The festival traditions of parody and role-play provide a refreshing vacation from the norms of everyday life. In fact, in the most rigorously observant communities, Purim may be the primary locus for the temporary expression of secular culture. Most probably, a melange of influences from various sources outside the ancient land of Israel melded to create a holiday marked by reversals, revelry, and joyous celebration.

This kind of role-playing and inversion is obviously not

⁶⁴Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 18a. See also Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, 251-259.

⁶⁵Quoted in "Quote, Unquote," *Jerusalem Report*, 26 August 1993.

particular to Jewish culture. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque spirit has been shown to adhere to a form of logic that inverts the world, creating “a second life,” which is able to

consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted.⁶⁶

The Purim festival is a structure which, like the carnival in Medieval Europe, enables the folk to symbolically and for a (far more) limited time throw off the strictures of their every day lives by enacting the life of the Other.

Since the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people, Judaism has defined Other as the gentile in many lands with whom the Jews lived as neighbors and from whom they nevertheless kept distinct. In a sense, Purim enables Jews to play the role of gentile; to have the liminal experience of enacting, for a time, that which they are not. This, of course, is a form of play, which helps one come to terms with the work of life. Throughout most of Jewish history, perhaps beginning with

⁶⁶Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr., Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 34.

the Jews of ancient Persia where some originating Purim event may have taken place, the work of life has been, according to Monford Harris, that of "coming to grips with exile."⁶⁷ In fact, Purim can be seen as the quintessential holiday of the Diaspora, not rooted in the land or god of Israel, but in the customs and behavior of the surrounding community, whoever, wherever, and of whichever time period that may be. Indeed, whenever Jews anywhere celebrate a victory, they may call it Small Purim or *Purim Katan*.⁶⁸ As such, they observe the occasion with revelry, inversions, plays, and other Purim customs.

Jewish history recalls that by the fifth century, Purim observances included games in which children pelted each other with nuts, raucous parades, erecting and burning effigies of Haman, riding through the streets with a doll representing Haman while shouting or blowing trumpets at it, and much revelry.⁶⁹ During the Middle Ages, Purim merrymaking began to

⁶⁷Harris, "Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order." 165.

⁶⁸Heilman, "Purim: This is Who We Are Not," 109. See also Philip Goodman, "Special Purims," in *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 14-37.

⁶⁹For an extended historical discussion of the burning of effigies of Haman, see Horowitz, "The Rite to be Reckless," 9-54. See also Abrahams, "The Purim-Play and the Drama in Hebrew," *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, 260-261.

resemble European Christian customs associated with the Saturnalian Feast of Fools and the carnival before Lent.⁷⁰ According to Ahuva Belkin, in an article on the association of the image of the fool with Purim, the wearing of the "habit de fou" (a headdress with ears) and cross-dressing were some of the customs found in both Christian and Jewish merrymaking during festival time. Belkin asserts that Yeshiva students elected a Purim King and a Purim Rabbi who resembled the fools of the Christian carnivals in the spirit in which they enacted parodies concerning the Rabbi, the Bible, prayer books, the sacred books of the Talmud, and the Haggadah.⁷¹

The earliest form of Purim performance may have been the one-man show in which a jester would inspire levity by reciting a Purim monologue or poem at the family's ceremonial feast.⁷² References to Purim performances by young men elected as Purim kings are extant, beginning in the sixteenth century.⁷³ The

⁷⁰Doniach, *Purim*, 126. See also Glynne Wickham, "Mummings, Disguisings and Masques," in *The Medieval Theatre*. 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 159-166.

⁷¹Ahuva Belkin, "'Habit De Fou' in Purim Spiel?," 40-55. See also Doniach, *Purim*, 125-154.

⁷²Rozik, "Adoption of Theatre," 80.

⁷³Doniach, *Purim*, 128-130. See also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Contraband: Text and Analysis of a Purim-shpil," 5.

play, as a genre of Purim folk performance, probably developed fully in the late seventeenth century. Before 1705, for example, a 'Commedia' about Queen Esther was being performed (with musical accompaniment) in homes of standing in Berlin.⁷⁴ In 1792, an edict forbade the Jews of Hamburg to perform an Ahasuerus Play. This was likely a popular *purimshpil* text, as the *Ahasuerus Play* is the oldest published *purimshpil*, dated 1708, from Frankfurt am Main.⁷⁵ By the first decade of the eighteenth century, the *purimshpil* was a regularized element of (Ashkenazi) Jewish Purim celebrations.⁷⁶ Plays were being given by groups of *yeshivah* students who went from home to home in the ghetto. Imitating their Christian counterparts, the mummers or carolers, they adopted the custom of performing holiday playlets. In time, various Jewish stories, both biblical and non-biblical, were used as subjects for the plays.⁷⁷ The holiday plays given throughout

⁷⁴While the play script is not preserved, evidence of the play is retained in an anti-theatrical and/or anti-Jewish ruling set down at this time: the authorities levied a punitive tax on the homeowner who hosted the performance. See Shmeruk, *Yiddish Biblical Plays*, 20.

⁷⁵Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, 264. See also Shmeruk, "Ahasuerus Play," in *Yiddish Biblical Plays*, 211-260.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 20. For an account of Yiddish language *purimshpiln* given in the late 1800s and early 1900s in Eastern Europe, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Contraband: Performance, Text and Analysis of a Purim-shpil," *TDR* 24:3 (Fall 1980): 5-16.

⁷⁷Rozik, "Adoption of Theatre," 80.

the European Jewish population centers used techniques and conventions of the gentile theatre of the day.⁷⁸ Thus, Jewish communities absorbed significant aspects of popular culture through theatre models before the popularity of the *purimshpil* declined in the nineteenth century.

The Bobover *purimshpil* is unique in contemporary Jewish practice. While other communities make plays on Purim (industrious New York spectators can visit five or six Purim playlets in Boro Park alone each year), the Bobover community has elevated its *purimshpil* to a central place in its Purim observance. In fact, the Bobover group may be credited with reviving the practice among contemporary American Hasidic communities.⁷⁹ Many members of other Hasidic groups attend the Bobover play, an extravaganza garnering audiences of over a thousand. By watching the Bobover *purimshpil*, spectators

⁷⁸Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah*, 72. See for example, Leone de Sommi Ebreo's *A Comedy of Bethrothal* (c. 1550), an example of a *purimshpil* in which gentile theatrical conventions (such as the character types of the *commedia dell'Arte*) are fully articulated. Leone de Sommi, Ebreo, *A Comedy of Bethrothal (Tsahoth B'dihutha D'Kiddushin)*, ed. and trans., Alfred S. Golding (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions Canada, 1988).

⁷⁹According to Shifra Epstein, in 1976/77 when she undertook her first study of the Bobover Purim observance it was the only community that performed a *purimshpil* and made it a community event of such importance. See Epstein, "The Celebration of a Contemporary Purim in the Bobover Community," 202.

participate symbolically in overturning norms and imbibing the role of the Other even when they themselves are not in costume.

While not every Jew chooses to dress up on Purim, every spectator at the *purimshpil* participates in symbolic carnival, masquerading as Other, and drinking in the theatrical life that the *Book of Esther* enthusiastically sanctions. In fact, the Bobover performance practice of staging the Purim play around a table suggests that celebrants take in the holiday revelry as a joyous repast shared with the other members of the community. The table functions on both the symbolic and literal levels as the setting for a celebratory feast. In the next chapter, I examine the spatial accommodations within which the feast of the *purimshpil* is held, at a table whose banquet serves up both food and symbols.

Chapter III: The Splendid Table: Framing the Theatrical Event

Thou preparest a table before me. . .
Psalms 23:5

The Bobover *purimshpil* reflects the deeply theatricalized life that was the extraordinary characteristic of court society in Europe during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The festive banquet and its modeling of the customs of royalty, two outstanding symbolic characteristics of the contemporary Hasidic *purimshpil*, are vestiges of modes of behavior that attended the social life of the aristocracy during festival times in those periods. This chapter identifies current theatrical and performative practices in the Bobover Purim *tish* and situates them in their appropriate context as rooted in the development of European courtly manners. I compare the Bobover *purimshpil* to theatrical entertainments in the great halls of Medieval and Tudor nobility and to the Renaissance court masques of Ben Jonson. These comparisons demonstrate that specific practices in this contemporary Hasidic performance tradition are analogous to the performance modes of those earlier periods. This

chapter does not discuss Purim practices in other domains, such as the home and the synagogue, except when they relate to the theatricalized *purimshpil* setting.¹

The dining table, a profoundly symbolic and culturally loaded object, functions as the framing device of the *purimshpil*. It is no mere coincidence that the table also functioned, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as a primary setting around which "the civilizing process," to use Norbert Elias' suggestive phrase, took place.² Moreover, the table, and the great hall surrounding it, served as the setting for aristocratic entertainments that transmitted these new courtly customs to the nobility, eventually filtering into other classes of their respective societies as well. Inevitably, these habits were transformed into the simple, courteous [i.e. courtly] behavior we now regard as manners.³ Not surprisingly, conduct at table was a substantial component of the new modes of comportment.⁴ These

¹For a concise discussion of Bobover Purim practices conducted on the streets, in schools, in the home, and in the *bes medresh*, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Performance of precepts/precepts of performance: Hasidic Celebrations of Purim in Brooklyn," in *By Means of Performance*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 109-117. See also Jack Kugelmass, "Between Two Worlds: Notes on the Celebration of Purim Among New York Jews, March 1985," in *Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 33-52.

²Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The Development of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1939; reprint, New York: Urizen Books, 1978).

³*Ibid.*, 9.

⁴*Ibid.* See especially, "On Behavior at Table," 84-129.

ideas of decorum also reached European Jewish communities that were, like those of their gentile counterparts, affected by the fashions of the aristocracy.⁵

Most contemporary mainstream Jewish communities in Europe (and around the world) have long since let go of these affinities, adopting instead, the current modes of fashion in their own societies. However, Hasidic communities, recognizing in those customs an apt analogy for their vision of the spiritual realm, have preserved a number of courtly traditions. In describing the Purim food practices of the Bobover community, for example, Epstein asserts that the community regards the Purim *tish* as a "kingly feast,"⁶ a precursor to the "imaginary feast" in the world to come, during which God will entertain the righteous.⁷ Indeed, the following Jewish legend suggests that there is a connection in Jewish lore between feasting in the *Book of Esther* and gratification in the world to come:

⁵It has been noted, for example, that in dress and appearance, the Hasidim adopted, held on to, and eventually sanctified fashions that had historically been those of the Polish upper classes. By the time of the expansion of Hasidism from Poland to Russia, Ukraine, and points beyond, the Polish gentry had given up some dress styles such as the long outer coat (*kapota*) and the wide fur-trimmed hat (*shtreimel*) worn under a skullcap (*yarmulke*). The Hasidim took on and preserved these clothing styles and continue to wear them today. See Aaron Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, trans. Shmuel Himmelstein (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing, 1992), 297.

⁶Epstein, "Celebration," 164.

⁷*Ibid.*, 160. Epstein cites the Talmud for the origin of this idea.

So sure was Ahasuerus of his success as a host that he dared say to his Jewish guests: "Will Your God be able to match this banquet in the future world?" Whereunto the Jews replied: "The banquet God will prepare for the righteous in the world to come is that of which it is written, 'No eye hath seen it but God's; He will accomplish it for them that wait upon Him.' If God were to offer us a banquet like unto thine, O king, we should say, Such [sic] as this we ate at the table of Ahashuerus.⁸

Hasidim have a great fondness for customs of royalty, which for them are redolent with associations of Jewish life before the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the nation.⁹ For the Hasidic believer, the *tish* is a repast--a weekly taste--of the messianic reward that awaits the righteous at the end of days. On Purim, when the idea of eating and drinking is heightened in the minds of the community, the act of sitting with the *rebe* at the *tish* symbolically turns the weekly repast into a sumptuous feast. Clearly, this is but one of a number of possible ways members may understand the Purim *tish*.

⁸Louis Ginzberg, *Bible Times and Characters from Joshua to Esther*, vol. 4 of *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 372.

⁹For a description the Temple of Solomon, see 1 Kings 6-7. The table on which the show bread was displayed was of pure gold, as were all the vessels within. See 1 Kings 7:48-50. According to Jewish legend the Temple was unparalleled in magnificence. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 154-157. As discussed in chapter II of the present work, Joseph Roach would recognize in this legend a 'prelapsarian myth of origin.'

The table serves as the framing device for the celebration at which the *purimshpil* is performed. As Mary Douglas has observed, we are in the realm of consciousness "whenever a correspondence is found between a given social structure and the structure of symbols by which it is expressed."¹⁰ My aim in this chapter is both to describe the *purimshpil* custom and to explore further the symbolism of the table in the awareness of the community that gathers around it. Epstein's informative research is based on anthropological and Jewish sources. I use theatre theory to elucidate, for the first time, the theatrical notions that are inseparable from the courtly life of the Middle Ages and Renaissance and that contribute richly to the Bobover *purimshpil* tradition.

Employing contemporary performance theory, most notably Schechner's concept of environmental theatre, this chapter also illustrates the way in which the table as stage-set nourishes the reciprocal kinship ties among Hasidim at the *tish*. These ties mirror the relationships among spectators at Medieval and at Renaissance court theatricals, where a similar audience dynamic was in operation. Moreover, theatre historians, among them medievalist Meg Twycross

¹⁰Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 249-275 quotation at 257.

and Marvin Carlson, in his work on Renaissance court theatre spaces, enable me to locate the *purimshpil* within a tradition that is indisputably a part of Western theatre history. Epstein's body of work on the Bobover community, while comprehensive as anthropological and Jewish studies analysis, has only minimally touched on the significant contribution of theatre history to this remarkable Hasidic tradition. This chapter aims to fill that gap.

Functioning as the visual and thematic frame for the community festival, the set design of the *purimshpil* situates the audience and stage spaces in a complimentary fashion to suggest a banquet surrounded by guests at table. The physical set-up of the audience and performer spaces establishes the analogy of a company of diners partaking of a repast. Just as people facing each other around a table often share a meal, so too is the *purimshpil* taken in by a community of celebrants seated around a platform--one that also functions as a dining table during the festivity. Mary Douglas illustrates how social categories emerge from meanings in systems of eating and drinking:

Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family.

Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests. The grand operator is the line between intimacy and distance. Those we know at meals we also know at drinks. The meal expresses close friendship.¹¹

A sense of kinship is established during the *purimshpil* by use of a table as the major setting. This perception replicates the sense of familial intimacy that was a significant dynamic of the indoor theatre in the great halls of the Medieval feudal courts.

In an article entitled "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," Meg Twycross describes the efficaciousness of the Medieval entertainments as linked to the kinship ties in the community of spectators:

The effect is almost impossible to replicate in a modern production. A random paying audience lacks the essential prerequisite: it isn't a part of a family, in the medieval sense of a closely-knit in-group for their fellows. Even if the group was highly stratified, nonetheless they were all part of this 'family,' and shared the same sense of private jokes.¹²

¹¹Ibid., 256.

¹²Meg Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," in *The Cambridge Guide to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 37-84, quotation at 79.

Similarly, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the Purim *tish* as a "large-scale communal meal, a hyperbolization of the family feast."¹³

The particular stage design of the *purimshpil* is the major antecedent that makes possible the specific and reciprocal relationships between actor and audience and between the spectators themselves during the celebration. As stage set, the table evokes and reinforces the community's links of kinship, which ultimately shape the entire event.

The multipurpose, table-like scaffold, inserted into the midst of the audience space, structures the spectators' experience. Seating for viewers is arranged around the platform on three sides, so that those in the first rows are actually sitting before the platform as if at a table (see fig. 1). The fourth side of the platform abutts the imaginary fourth wall of an adjacent (makeshift) picture frame stage (see fig. 2). Thus, by use of a platform that can be employed as either table or stage the *purimshpil* setting presents a metaphoric meal as a defining characteristic of the theatrical performance.

While the proscenium stage, with its makeshift arch is the main playing space, the scaffold, which resembles a table and thrusts into the midst of the audience space, is used as an additional playing area.

¹³Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 117.

This singular arrangement of performer and audience spaces has a physical as well as symbolic impact on the relationship of actor to spectator. The scaffold subverts the rigid separation of audience and actor spheres common to the typical picture frame stage. The tabletop, which also functions as a thrust stage, breaks down the distinction between actor and spectator domains, giving players and viewers both some physical and visual access to the other's realm (see fig. 3).

Even when not used directly as a stage, the tabletop serves as a semiotic reminder of the concept of feasting. As the largest and most visually dominant property in the auditorium, the tabletop functions as a constant suggestion of company at a feast. In addition, a ritualized meal (which is actually served on the tabletop to those sitting closest around it) precedes the performance of the Purim playlet. Thus, the concept of table, mirrored by its corporeal manifestation, functions as the principal structural device by which viewers contextualize the theatrical performance. Framed in this manner, each of the performative elements of the celebration is prodigiously expressive, suggesting numerous possible readings of the theatrical presentation.

Contemporary theatre scholars now accept as axiomatic the idea that the attention of spectators is structured by the spatial arrangements existent in a given performance. According to Marco De Marinis, "the actual placement of the spectators within the theatrical space and their relation to the playing area are central to the way in which the performance is received."¹⁴ Marvin Carlson points out that the very word theatre--the place where one observes--reflects the importance of the articulation of space to the entire cultural system that is the theatre. He goes so far as to assert that spatial configuration "can almost be taken as a defining condition of theatre."¹⁵

The insertion of a table into the design of stage and audience spheres is indeed the defining spatial component of the *purimshpil*. The seating of spectators around a table that is also a stage enriches the reciprocal relationships between performers and audience. As in theatrical performances in the great halls of Medieval Europe, most audience members who attend the *purimshpil* constitute an example of what Richard Schechner calls an "integral audience. . . where

¹⁴Marco De Marinis, "Dramaturgy of the Spectator," trans. Paul Dwyer, *TDR* 31.2 (Summer 1987): 104.

¹⁵Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 128.

people come because they have to or because the event is of special significance to them."¹⁶

Yet, the bond already shared by community members gathered at the event is accentuated by the spatial arrangement, which brings associations of familial eating and drinking into the theatrical event.¹⁷ In fact, this particular audience/performer dynamic confers on the spectacle its singular nature. Moreover, the audience/performer interaction creates abundant associations for viewers. Consequently, the *purimshpil* is an exceedingly rich theatrical and cultural artifact that functions on multiple levels: as theatre aesthetic, as religious ritual, as spiritual communion, and as community celebration. At the same time, the festivity is specifically regarded by its folk audience as a theatrical entertainment created especially for the occasion. This perception is crucial to the meaning generated by the event.

The *purimshpil* takes place in the community's *bes medresh*, a large, public hall that serves as the Bobover house of study, prayer,

¹⁶Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (1977; reprint, New York: Routledge, 1988), 194.

¹⁷In talking to me about the relationship of community members to the *rebe* a Bobover woman said, "We consider him to be like our father." At the *tish*, there is a likely association to father at head of a Sabbath table. Personal communication with author, 9 March 1993.

and assembly.¹⁸ In her lucid article on Hasidic Purim celebrations in Brooklyn ethnographer Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett characterizes the home, the synagogue, and the street as separate spheres of performance, each with particular meaning. Her analysis of the celebration in the *bes medresh* is worth quoting at length:

The central paradigm for celebrations in both domestic and public ritual spheres is the table: since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem two millennia ago, the home and *bes medresh* or synagogue have functioned as the sanctuary, the table as altar, and the food upon it as offerings. The distinctive genre of Hasidic performance is the *tish*. . . . an event in the *bes medresh* where the *rebe* presides over his male followers around a table, at a communal and largely symbolic meal. The Purim entertainments--parodies, music, and plays--are extensions of the *tish*.¹⁹

Physically, the tabletop, which abuts the proscenium, serves as an elongation of the stage. Yet, in actuality, the proscenium stage--and all the theatrical activity that takes place upon it--function as an extension of the *rebe's tish*. In theatrical terminology, it would be correct to say that a thrust stage has been appended to the

¹⁸Typically, in orthodox Jewish communities, along with prayer, various community festivities take place in the *bes medresh*. See David Kaufman, "Shul: The Orthodox Synagogue in Transition," in *Shul With a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999).

¹⁹Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 110.

proscenium. The thrust serves variously as tabletop and stage.

Thus, symbolically and physically, the theatre event evokes some attributes of the table just as the tabletop evokes other characteristics of the playing stage.

As is customary in a contemporary orthodox Jewish milieu, men's and women's spaces are separated. Along with the *rebe*, men and boys, for whom the *tish* is convened, occupy the main room in which the table/stage is situated. Those women who choose to attend take up a viewing gallery above the action (see fig. 4).²⁰ Of course, this setup gives men and women distinctly different pictures of the event. At the most basic level, differences in meaning are generated by the gendered division of the space. Most attendees are male. Women do not perform on stage and are not the intended audience of the *purimshpil*.

At the same time, hundreds of young girls and newly married women attend, often with the aim of seeing the performances of their fathers, brothers or other relatives, or even of seeing one of them, along with the *rebe*, as spectators in the hall below. An air of

²⁰This viewing area is reminiscent of the *cazuela* of theatres of the Spanish Golden Age. See N.D. Shergold, *A History of the Spanish Stage: From Medieval Times Until the End of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 207.

festivity permeates the women's gallery. As the women and girls stationed at the better viewing spots take up all available sight lines, others make do with mingling in groups at the periphery of the space. In the men's section, most of the spectators are intensely focused on the *rebe* and the play. However, the female area enjoys a more relaxed atmosphere. Here, the event is primarily social. Due to the difficulty of seeing anything of the performance once all available space is taken near the window dividing the men's and women's sections, groups of women and girls chat casually. During this community event, young girls stay up all night, unaccompanied by parents but within a safe and sanctioned environment nonetheless.

Audience reception is also framed by the spatial configuration of the table/stage setting, since it creates widely divergent site lines, even for viewers of the same gender. A spectator in the men's section, for example, might find himself in a location that affords a distinct view of the *rebe* and a limited view of the stage, or vice versa. On the other hand, a man could be seated directly between the *rebe* and the stage, affording an excellent view of each, though

not at the same time. For men, no matter where in the auditorium a viewer is located, he is considered to be at the *rebe's tish*.

In the woman's section, a viewer might easily enjoy a panoramic view of the entire scene below. Alternatively, she might find herself located in a spot that affords a view of only the stage and not the *rebe*, or vice versa (see Fig. 5). For women, there is the distinct sense of being onlookers in a gathering convened for men, since the participatory elements of the custom do not extend to them.²¹

On Purim, the *bes medresh* serves as sanctuary and theatre, the table/stage as altar, and the performance (with its preceding ritual meal) as offering. The proscenium stage—and all the theatrical activity that takes place upon it—functions as an extension of the *rebe's tish*. In other words, in Hasidic custom, the *tish* is the normative performative space; it is the proscenium that is added on the holiday of Purim. Indeed, the *rebe's tish*, a form of assembly at which the *rebe* presides giving a homily or lesson, is a performative activity common to all Hasidic communities.²² Therefore, it is the

²¹A detailed analysis of women's reception of the *purimshpil*, which I do not undertake here, remains an important area for future investigation.

²²In Hasidic custom, the *rebe's tish* takes place around a table at which there is food, singing and words of Torah. While the custom has roots in the Talmud, it was popularized by the Kabbalists of the sixteenth century. See Wertheim, "The Rebbe's [sic] Tish and his Torah Teachings," *Law and Custom*, 248-251. See also Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (1907; reprint, New York:

addition of theatrical activity to the *tish* on Purim that sets this *tish* apart from all others. Moreover, it is the augmentation of the tabletop with a proscenium stage that extends to the Purim *tish* a range of specifically theatrical, rather than merely performative activity.

The acting space, which is constructed in a makeshift fashion using desks pushed together, is about 6 feet long and 4 feet wide. The proscenium arch and wings are erected using drapery, poles and wire. Each year, community members prepare a thematically appropriate backdrop. Usually, this setting is painted by community members. During extraordinary years, a backdrop may be rented.²³ The scenery is hung against the back wall of the auditorium along a length of wire. Depending on the complexity of the performance, from a few to a substantial number of props are added. With these

AMS Press, 1966), 38. For an anecdotal description of the *tish*, see Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl*, (1952; reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 177-178. For descriptions of actual *tishn* in contemporary communities, see Jerome R. Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 275-279. See also Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 83-93. For descriptions of the various *tishn* held in the Bobover community on Purim, see Shifra Epstein, "Celebration of a Contemporary Purim in the Bobover Hasidic Community," Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1979, 160-163.

²³Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes one such *purimshpil* performance that took place for over 4,000 Hasidic spectators at Felt Forum at Madison Square Garden, New York in 1982. For this performance, which was a charity fundraising event, professional backdrops were rented. See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 114.

preparations, the *bes medresh* is transformed into a festive theatrical space. However, the *bes medresh* is not perceived as a theatre *per se*, as it is never completely separated from its ritual context as a house of study, prayer and assembly.

Similarly, as Meg Twycross explains, the Medieval and Tudor great halls were temporary theatrical spaces into which plays--interludes, disguisings and pageants--were brought:

At mealtimes, the servants would set up a table (known, for obvious reasons, as a board) on trestles on the dais before the lord's seat: this was called the *high table*. Other tables were set up in the rush-strewn body of the hall, end on to the high table. . . .Into this space came the play. It will be immediately apparent that this makes the hall something different than from a theatre. It was someone's living space temporarily converted, familiar working surroundings which accommodated, for an hour or two, an alternative world of make-believe (*italics mine*).²⁴

Moreover, the idea of eating and drinking was never completely absent from these theatricals, just as the idea of prayer and study is never totally severed from the Bobover house of assembly.

Twycross calls drama in the great halls "an entertaining pause for digestion in the Christmas eating and drinking."²⁵ In fact, the

²⁴Twycross, "Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," 67.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 69

Bobover *purimshpil* can be considered an inversion of the Christian holiday custom; whereas the court theatricals in question functioned as great feasts accompanied by entertainments, the *tish* is regarded as a form of study accompanied by food. In the spirit of Purim inversion, study during this festival *tish* is accomplished by taking in a theatrical performance on a Jewish theme. In both the great halls of the monarchs and the headquarters of the Bobover *rebe*, an interconnection between the ideas of eating and drinking and the theatre is expressed by the spatial arrangements. As Twycross observes:

Dinner in the great hall of a late medieval magnate was itself a kind of social theatre, regulated by a fixed etiquette from the processional entry of the lord and lady to the *voidee* after which they retired. During the dinner lord, lady and honored guests were displayed on the dais like figures on a stage. The household and lesser relations and dependents sat in the body of the hall, again according to a protocol which dictated that the lower down the social scale one was, the further from the high table one sat.²⁶

On Purim, theatrical proceedings that are brought onto the *tish* can be regarded as the Hasidic version of entertainment on the 'high table.'

²⁶Ibid., 76. During the *purimshpil*, the *rebe's* sons and sons-in law sit on his left side and older men of the community sit on his right. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 114.

The physical table at the center of the *tish* calls to mind the motif of feasting, a central theme in the *Book of Esther*.²⁷ Along with merry-making on Purim, Jews are required by *Halakha* to send portions of food to the poor.²⁸ Customarily, the observant also send portions of food to their friends. This law is connected to the portions of food given in a special manner to Esther, because she found favor in the eyes of King's eunuch.²⁹ According to biblical scholar Michael Fox, "since portions are not only donated to the poor, but are exchanged by Jews generally, the gift-giving must have a function beyond the charitable supplying of needs, namely the creation of a symbolic communal banquet to which everyone is invited."³⁰ The table foregrounds the concept of eating and drinking, lending richly figurative associations to the entire event. In fact, the *purimshpil*, referred to simply as *tish*, is observed as a metaphorical

²⁷According to Sandra Beth Berg, the term feasting, '*mishteh*,' "indicating eating and drinking on special occasions, occurs 20 times in the book of Esther and only 24 times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible." For a discussion of the frequency and meaning of feasting in the Book of Esther, see Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1979), 31-47.

²⁸Esther 9:22b. In the harem, portions of food and cosmetics were meant to enhance the maiden's desirability. Esther, it will be recalled, was chosen as queen as the result of being the most beautiful maiden. See Esther 2:17.

²⁹Esther 2:9.

³⁰Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 118. On the day of Purim in Hasidic neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the streets are filled with people carrying baskets of food back and forth.

feast. The huge platform in the center of the large auditorium is draped in white and, at least at the start of the proceedings, resembles a Sabbath dining table. Around this platform-cum-table, rows of benches seat approximately one hundred revelers at tableside (see fig. 4). Hundreds of others are seated in row upon row behind them throughout the large hall. Abutting the table is a proscenium stage, in which the boards are of the same height, and on which the Purim playlet is performed.

The unique spatial set-up enables action and actors to cross, at times, from the stage proper directly to the table. Thus, after the symbolic meal has been eaten, the table also functions as a stage. This extraordinary arrangement of space has led Epstein to label the Bobover *purimshpil* a “drama on a table.”³¹ In fact, various performances other than the playlet itself take place on the tabletop. For example, actors will occasionally cross from the area within the proscenium onto to the tabletop, then choose an audience member sitting at tableside and involve him in some comic bit. Often, a

³¹Shifra Epstein, “Drama on a Table: The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl,” in *Judaism Viewed from Within and From Without*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 195-217.

humorous interlude such as the routine of a jester (*badkhan*) will be performed on the tabletop rather than the stage.³²

The *rebe* sits at the head of the table, in a place of honor positioned directly across from the proscenium arch. In the performance of 2001, the *rebe's* entire table was constructed on a raised dais, so that the audience was afforded an excellent view of the sage and his party.³³ During previous years, the *rebe* was seated at the same height as the large tabletop at which the audience sat. In all cases, care is taken to ensure that the *rebe's* space is visible to as many people as possible. The *purimshpil* is ostensibly prepared and performed for the pleasure of the *rebe* who, like the Medieval and Renaissance lord was before him, is the privileged spectator.³⁴

³²As was the custom among the European courts, the Bobover *rebe* has an official jester who accompanies him to weddings and other events. See Shifra Epstein, "The Daniel-Shpil in the Bobover Hasidic Community," in *Yiddish Texts and Studies* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1998), 36-37.

³³It should be noted that the performance of 2001 was given for the new *rebe*, Grand Rabbi Naftali Halberstam, who was formally designated as leader by his father, the late Grand Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, who passed away on August 2, 2000. See "Grand Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, 92, Is Dead," *New York Times*, 3 Aug. 2000, Metro section. For a discussion of the Bobover *purimshpil* in the context of the new leadership, see Shari Troy, "The Mother of All Purimspielen," *Jerusalem Report*, 12 March 2001, 40-41. It is interesting to note the new configuration of the *rebe's* seat this year, in light of variations occurring in the *purimshpil* over time. The raised dais on which he sat resembled descriptions of the accommodations for the monarch in the European court theatres. For a discussion of the spatial set up accommodating the privileged spectator in the Italian Renaissance theatre, see Carlson, *Places of Performance*, 136-142.

³⁴Epstein, "Celebration," 222.

By watching both the performance and the *rebe* and by noting the pleasure he derives from the performance, the spectators too, glean pleasure from the revelry. At the same time, the *rebe's* reactions serve to direct viewers as to how to respond.

Both before and after the playlet is performed for the *rebe*, however, a number of ritualized activities take place. Some of these actions are performed by the *rebe* for the benefit of the viewers. Other episodes are rendered by actors for the perusal of the *rebe*. All of these activities invite audience participation, such that the spectators rarely watch the entire proceedings passively. Indeed, the many opportunities for spectator involvement at the *tish* create a poetics of partaking rather than of merely watching. At the same time, all of the various components of the performance are eagerly observed by some portion of the community of spectators. No one episode stands alone. Like courses at a banquet, each scene derives its meaning as a cumulative component of the entire performance.

Theatrically speaking, the elements comprising the *tish* function as an organic "performance text"³⁵ that relies on numerous

³⁵Referring to all of the elements that are "woven together to create the texture of the performance." See De Marinis, "Dramaturgy," 100.

extra-dialogic elements to create the sensibility of the whole. Though the Purim playlet, with its story of Jewish survival, is unique to the Purim *tish*, that component is actually only one part of a multidimensional series of performative events extending over many hours. Moreover, the setup of performer and audience spaces endows the *purimshpil* with a number of characteristics of Schechnerian environmental theatre. In fact, the *tish* is deeply (albeit unwittingly) indebted to environmental theatre practices.

Bestriding ritual and theatre, the *purimshpil* is an artifact of both. The presentation of a play on the holiday of Purim is prescribed by Jewish custom and thus operates as ritual for an integral audience. At the same time, as a theatrical offering, the *purimshpil* is an aesthetic creation that functions in the realm of art (for at least some non-Bobover attendees). While most of the spectators are from the Bobover group, over the years, outsiders such as members of other Hasidic sects, university scholars, students, and some secular Jews have begun attending the event. Therefore, the spectators are no longer purely an integral audience but are comprised, as well, of a number of "accidental audience members,"

whom Schechner describes as those that attend for reasons other than ritual need.³⁶

Taking place in a partially transformed space, the *purimshpil* incorporates the entire environment into the performance. Spectators, of course, are aware that the *bes medresh*, a place usually reserved for religious prayer and study, will house a theatrical event. Yet, the special license of the Purim festival does not negate the presence of the holy Torah scrolls, which remain in the ark, though they are not in any way used in the proceedings. Similarly, his playing the special role of central spectator rather than his everyday role as community leader does not diminish the *rebe's* place as head of the community. On the contrary, these dynamics contribute productively to the *purimshpil's* symbolic meaning.

Seated around the table-like platform, with the *rebe* and the proscenium stage as two points of focus, the audience surrounds most of the goings on in the performance. As a spectator's attention moves through the space to take in a various scenic elements, other spectators become a part of his *mise-en-scene*. The organization of theatrical space in the *purimshpil* encourages "selective inattention,"

³⁶Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 195.

a term Schechner coined to describe the “unconscious scanning” that is possible in environmental theatre:

The performance can be contemplated; the spectator can choose to be in or out, moving her attention up and down a sliding scale of involvement. Selective inattention allows patterns of the whole to be visible, patterns that otherwise would be burned out of consciousness by too intense concentration.³⁷

During virtually the entire *purimshpil*, the focus in the environment is “flexible and variable,” words Schechner applied to shifting foci in the theatre he envisioned.³⁸ At any given moment, many theatrical activities vie for spectators’ attention. From the *rebe* to the playlet to other audience members who may be reacting to the play performance to audience members jostling for space, these and other stimuli inform each individual spectator’s reception of the event.

More importantly, the physical setup of the auditorium itself becomes seamlessly integrated into the *purimshpil*. More than a play, the *purimshpil* is a *tish*, a table at which a symbolic meal is served. Spectators take in the theatrical banquet as guests around

³⁷Ibid., 202. I am indebted to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for advising me to think of the concept of selective inattention in relation to the Bobover *purimshpil*. Private communication with the author, 25 May 1993.

³⁸Richard Schechner, “6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre,” *TDR* 12.3 (Spring 1968): 56.

its table. As such there is a participatory element to the event that is largely absent from traditional theatre. Schechner asserts that “the proscenium is a perfected form wherein the digestive guts seated in the darkened auditorium hungrily await the food, chewed and fed from the brilliantly illuminated stage (mouth).”³⁹ At the *tish*, where house lights are lit at all times, viewers can gaze and (ostensibly) direct their focus in many directions, consciously and unconsciously choosing the way in which they take in the performance. They could, if they chose, even change places to view the event from various places in the room.⁴⁰

The *tish* melds the poetics of environmental theatre with those of traditional performance. There is, for example, a conventional play given on the proscenium stage. However, both the events encompassing the playlet and the organization of space around the proscenium envelop the prosaic aspects (such as scenery, dialogue and costume) of a given play. In so doing, the theatrical environment subverts the deep empathy that can lead to the sensation of being swept away by the performance--the

³⁹Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, 18. Schechner credits Donald M. Kaplan with the idea.

⁴⁰In practice, the space is so crowded that one would, if even able to extricate oneself from a place, lose it by getting up to move around. However, people do mill about in areas that, in any case, enjoy inferior sight lines.

quintessence of the Aristotelian theatre model. Instead, onlookers undergo “a kind of in-and-out experience; a sometimes dizzyingly rapid alternation of empathy and distance,” which Schechner describes as one hallmark of environmental theatre.⁴¹

The spatial set-up of the table/stage fragments the spectator’s focus. Rather than concentrate solely the action within the proscenium, audience members tend to peruse various points in the room. In the same way, the *purimshpil* text is constituted by the variety of events surrounding the particular playlet presented in a given year. In fact, more important than the playlet performed is the sense of the larger story told by the *tish* as a whole. That is the story of a community breaking bread together and telling the tale of its history. Here too, the *purimshpil* possesses an important affinity with environmental theatre where, as Schechner says, “the fundamental logic . . . is not the logic of the story but the logic of story-telling.”⁴²

The activities comprising the performance text of the production (heretofore referred to simply as *tish*) afford viewers and participants alike a cohesive aesthetic experience. The overall

⁴¹Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, 18.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 83.

structure of the *tish* remains constant from year to year. However, some variations in the scenes, and developments in performance practices have occurred over time.⁴³ The elements described herein are culled from my own observation of the *tish* during the years 1993-2001 as well as the community's videotapes of previous live performances. The following composite description, therefore, is not a script of the *tish* as it is presented every year. Rather, it is a description of both the essential and complimentary elements that create the Bobover Purim *tish* and produce its remarkable poetics. To extend the metaphor of the banquet, the delicacies may change with each setting of the table, but the feast, properly prepared, will similarly nourish all those who partake from year to year. In the same manner, the *purimshpil* sustains and nourishes its audience annually.

In the preface to the Stuart masque *Hymenaei* author Ben Jonson refers to his creation as "My full tables. . .the most nourishing,

⁴³As an evolving tradition, the *purimshpil* undergoes changes. In comparing Epstein's 1979 dissertation to her (1998) monograph about the 1987 production of "The Daniel-Shpil," one notices significant variations in a number of performance practices. A change of venue was one important 1986 development, following the building of a new Bobover *bes medresh*. Most recently, it was interesting to note another significant change--the placement of the *rebe's* seat, along with those of his entourage, on a high dais for the *purimshpil* of 2001.

and sound meates of the world.”⁴⁴ He goes so far as to hint that the magnificent scenography of his collaborator, Inigo Jones was, on a theoretical level at least, no more than “perhaps a few *Italian* herbs, pick’d up, and made into a *sallade*.”⁴⁵ In *The Jonsonian Masque*, Stephen Orgel’s examination of Jonson’s theoretical and artistic influence on the masque as dramatic form, Orgel refers to Jonson as “the cook” of the masques.⁴⁶ That Jonson likens his own work to a ‘full table’ and that the *purimshpil* is conceived as a *tish*--a symbolic banquet--is more than a coincidental curiosity. In fact, on a conceptual level, the *tish* functions much the same as did the Jonsonian masque.

The Renaissance monarchs who commissioned Jonson and Jones to create the masques had in mind an occasional entertainment; a celebration of a specific event or personage, fashioned for an invited audience; a made-to-order compliment to the sovereign. Under Ben Jonson’s influence, the masque developed into an increasingly complex entertainment. Indeed, the masque provided its aristocratic

⁴⁴Ben Jonson, *Sad Shepherd, Fall of Mortimer, Masques and Entertainments*, vol. 7 of *Works*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, -- 11 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1941), 7:210.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 104.

spectators with much more than a theatrical compliment to the crown: a 'model of the universe' as well; a vision of the way in which the monarchy perceived the order of the world.⁴⁷

Similarly, in the Bobover court society, the *purimshpil* is an entertainment produced specifically for the pleasure of the community leader; created, in the words of community members, in order to "gladden the *rebe*" (*misameyakh zayn dem rebn*).⁴⁸ Yet, the worldview of the *purimshpil* extravaganza is meant to extend far beyond the *rebe* to the community at large. In fact, the *purimshpil* sets forth a model view of Bobover life and practice for the reception of the entire community and its guests. Furthermore, both the Jonsonian masque and the Bobover *purimshpil* employ inversion to provide a vision of the world awry before concluding with the normative picture of the societal environment desired and envisioned by the culture. In fact, the practices of the *purimshpil* mirror those of its Jonsonian predecessor on a number of levels.

The following description of *purimshpil* practices links current Hasidic custom to a number of English Renaissance court modes of

⁴⁷Ibid., 58.

⁴⁸Epstein, "Celebration," 221-226. See also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 114.

behavior documented by observers of the masque. While direct lineage from the court masque to this contemporary Hasidic entertainment is impossible to prove, clearly the Bobover *purimshpil* has some functions for its audience similar to those the masque had for its spectators. The habit of mounting a *purimshpil* gained wide popularity in late seventeenth century Europe as an expression of the inversions required by Jewish law during Purim observance. Indeed, the holiday of Purim (during which numerous religious strictures are relaxed) may well have become a point of entry for non-Jewish customs into Hasidic practices and folkways. Therefore, the following description of the community festival at which his court of followers fetes the *rebe* will demonstrate a number of striking similarities with the form of elaborate feasts at which European Renaissance monarchs were honored.

Like the masque, the *purimshpil* invariably begins with an extended wait for the *rebe's* entrance. The element of waiting for the monarch, an important component of the Jonsonian masque,⁴⁹ is equally important to the *purimshpil* in generating excitement and

⁴⁹For a description of an audience member's observations of the wait during a court masque in 1618, see *The Journals of Two Travellers [sic] in Elizabethan England and Early Stuart England: Thomas Platter and Horatio Busino*, trans., Peter Razzell, (London: Caliban Books, 1995), 136-139.

whetting the audience's appetite for the theatrical treat which is to follow. On the day of the *purimshpil*, the doors of the *bes medresh* have been open all day. In fact, many Bobover members have already spent the better part of the afternoon there at an earlier *tish*, listening to the *rebe's* teaching for Purim. (The *rebe* conducts five *tishn* during Purim.)⁵⁰ In early evening, the *rebe* and guests return to their homes enjoy a Purim banquet (*seudah*) and rest a bit before the final Purim *tish* and the *purimshpil*. At this time, those responsible for mounting the play will hurriedly assemble the sets and rearrange the furniture in the auditorium to create the large tabletop structure. They also hook up microphones, speakers, and prepare any other technical aspects they are using that year.

Since seating is reserved only for the leader and his retinue, most audience members begin staking out their claim to seats in the best line of vision two or three hours before the *rebe* is expected to appear. The festive air becomes manifest as spectators show up and mill around the large empty space, often leaving belongings on a spot

⁵⁰In Bobover custom, there are three special days associated with the Purim festival. The days begin with the Fast of Esther on the 13th of Adar in the Jewish calendar, followed by Purim, proper on the 14th and Shushan Purim, on the 15th, when the holiday is traditionally celebrated in walled cities, such as Jerusalem. The five *tishn* are conducted over the course of these three days. For a discussion of the various *tishn* held by the Bobover *rebe* during Purim, and a description of a most interesting one--the "drinking banquet," see

they wish to save. Over the next few hours in both the men's and women's sections, young people begin to arrive. They spend the time chatting and munching on snacks they have brought. Hasid Shlomo Gutter explains how people spend the time waiting for the *rebe* to arrive. "Somebody looks into a *sefer* [book] with a friend. Someone studies *Gemorah*, [Talmud] someone reads *tehillim* [psalms]. You do what ever you would be doing at another time."⁵¹

As the building fills with people, it becomes necessary to physically occupy the space one wants to keep. By the start of the event, many have been sitting in one spot for two or more hours. One needs stamina to attend the event in its entirety. (In the woman's section, where the line of vision necessitates standing, there are far more girls, than older women.) By ten or eleven o'clock at night, the *bes mdresh* is noisy and filled with people. In the men's section, the spaces around the table are so fully occupied that each man is likely to find himself in physical contact with the person in

Epstein, "The 'Drinking Banquet' (Trink-Siyde): A Hasidic Event for Purim," *Poetics Today* 15.1 (Spring 1994): 134-152.

⁵¹Shlomo Gutter (Bobover Hasid), telephone conversation with author, 19 September, 2000.

the next spot on the bench.⁵² By the time the *rebe* arrives later at night, the space is literally teeming with spectators.

Once all available space around the platform is taken, people occupy rows of benches that have been stacked up behind the *rebe's* location, in an area not adjacent to the table configuration. Often, male *yeshivah* students stand on these precarious temporary structures. Young men seemingly hang off every available nook and ledge. In fact, the male spectators are so close that a spectator who loses his balance can (and occasionally does) send all the bodies on an entire row of bleachers swaying and even falling, dominos style. One male, non-Bobover spectator said that the experience of being in the audience was not unlike being in the middle of a mosh-pit at a rock concert.⁵³ Even in this aspect, the *tish* resembles medieval court entertainments, where, according to Twycross, the audience encroached on the actors' playing space and where "it is possible that only the lord and lady on the dais actually had seats."⁵⁴

In the woman's U-shaped gallery above the auditorium, attendees occupy rows of non-movable benches. Toward nighttime,

⁵²The *tish* at which the *purimshpil* is performed is the most heavily attended of the year.

⁵³Daniel Orzech (non-Bobover audience member), personal communication with author, 11 March, 2001.

⁵⁴Twycross, "Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," 71.

some older women begin to arrive and find spots next to their daughters or friends. Females who want a good spot must stand on the first row of benches and lean forward on to a ledge before the glass window that separates the men's section from their own area. From upstairs, in order to see the goings on in the men's section (including the *rebe* and the play), it is necessary to maintain the standing position. As more and more women fill the space, there will often be three rows of women craning their necks to get a glimpse of the proceedings. While the women's section does not fill completely, all females in a spot with relatively good sight lines cannot help but come in direct and sustained physical contact with a number of people on all sides. However, this taxing post affords a fascinating view of the downstairs male audience and the *rebe* in its midst.⁵⁵ Hundreds of men in traditional black Hasidic garb surround the three sides of the white, T-shaped table. Dotted the sea-like congregation of men in black coats and hats below are inevitably a number of male (typically young) spectators who stand out, due to the costumes of brilliant and outlandish colors they have worn. The women and

⁵⁵For those of both genders, attending the Purim *tish* can be a physically grueling activity. There exists a parallel between the predicament of the audience at the *tish* and that of audiences at Happenings. See Susan Sontag,

girls who attend do not wear theatrical costumes, but dress up in bright and festive holiday attire.

The setup of the room establishes the *rebe* as the center of attention, much as the scenography of the masque fixed the royal recipient as the focus of his audience's fascination. Virtually all *purimshpil* revelers find the *rebe's* performance of spectatorship more significant than the playlet being given by the amateur thespians on the proscenium stage. The room is comprised of two points of interest which spectators vie to see: at one side, the *rebe* in his chair, and at the other, the players on stage. The *rebe*, like the English monarch before him, "has not yet stepped on the stage but neither is he wholly off it."⁵⁶ Just as the physical presence of the monarch gave meaning to the masque,⁵⁷ the *rebe's* appearance and spectatorship is the *purimshpil's* raison d'être.⁵⁸ During the play performance, spectators will often turn to watch their leader's responses, and many will watch him more closely than the play.

"Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," in *Against Interpretation* (1965; reprint, New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), 265.

⁵⁶Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967): 26.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁸Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 114.

The *rebe* is the ideal spectator. Accordingly, his comfortable, high-backed chair, vaguely reminiscent of a throne, is the focal point of audience fascination. The playlet takes place directly across from the *rebe*, down the length of a runway in the center and front of the long table.⁵⁹ From his spot before the table, the *rebe* can watch the show, enjoying the best possible view of the stage. Simultaneously, other audience members can see him as he presides over the affair in his role as prized observer (see fig. 6). Indeed, like his royal counterpart, the *rebe* “must not merely see the play, he must be seen to see it.”⁶⁰

On the table, directly in front of the *rebe*'s chair, stands a microphone, two lit festive candles, a large loaf of the Sabbath bread called *challah*, and an elaborate silver table setting--the 'golden vessels'--that will be used in the pre-play ritual.⁶¹ A number of empty seats line the table along both sides of the *rebe*'s empty chair. These seats are reserved for male members of the *rebe*'s family and

⁵⁹This structure resembles the *hanamichi* of the Kabuki theatre and serves a similar purpose of allowing the actor to walk through the audience at times, though in the *purimshpil* it is not used for actor's entrances and exits. For a description of the *hanamichi*, see Samuel Leiter, trans., *The Art of Kabuki: Famous Plays in Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 263.

⁶⁰Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 16.

⁶¹Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Hasidic Celebrations of Purim*, 113.

other honored men of the community. In both the *purimshpil* and the masque, closeness to the leader indexes the degree of status one enjoys in the community.⁶² The *rebe's* empty chair in its central place heightens the excitement of the crowd.

Shortly before the *rebe* arrives (which might be between ten or twelve at night), the assembled are buzzing with energy. Suddenly, a commotion ensues toward the back of the hall. The *rebe* makes an entrance with his entourage from a passageway leading directly from his adjacent house.⁶³ The *rebe* and his group are immediately surrounded by *yeshivah* students who dance around their leader, singing traditional Hasidic songs (*nigunim*). During this half-hour or longer, the students' singing becomes ecstatic. The crowd in the men's section joins in song. Finally, the *rebe* is escorted to the place of honor. He stands in front of his chair before the table while members of his retinue take their places flanking him alongside.

Standing thus, in the center of the space, with all eyes on him, the *rebe* acknowledges the assembled guests. This component of the presentation may begin with the leader casting his eyes over the

⁶²*Ibid.*, 11.

⁶³Marvin Carlson notes that Italian Renaissance theatres typically had a box with a private entrance for the ducal party. At Sabbionetta, there was a private walkway directly from the ducal residence to the theatre box. See *Places of Performance*, 149.

crowd. As he does so, men around the table, their eyes focused solely on the sage stretch their arm in his direction, hoping to be seen and personally acknowledged with a glass of *mashke* (liquor). Once the *rebe* makes eye contact with an individual, his name will be called and a small glass of previously poured whisky will be passed hand to hand through the audience to the named and acknowledged member. Each recipient will pass along some money to someone collecting in order to defray costs. This activity may go on for a half an hour or longer.

After many of those assembled have been acknowledged by the *rebe*, he leads the congregation in song. He will begin by singing a song called "Ayelet HaShachar," (The Morning Star) whose verses are taken from the twenty-second psalm. This hymn is connected with the *Book of Esther*. (In fact, another translation for the words Ayalet Hashachar is the name Esther). Often, he will sing verses to the audience while they sing the response. At the end of the communal sing along, the *rebe* performs *netilat yadayim* (ablution), the ritual washing of hands which is required before eating bread.⁶⁴

⁶⁴For a description of the ritual of ablution, see Yacov Newman and Gavriel Sivan, *Judaism A-Z: Lexicon of Terms and Concepts* (Jerusalem: Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization, 1980), 1.

The *challah* is then passed along to those at the table. The *rebe* dines on a traditional holiday meal taken from the ornate silver place setting. He eats only a bite or two of each course, while everyone else in the hall watches. The remaining portions of his food are distributed around the table to as many can get a piece of the leftovers. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, to the followers who reach for the remains of the *rebe's* meal, "food touched by the *rebe* has been trans-valued and is sacred."⁶⁵ Even those men who do not get a piece of the remnants, however, are symbolically included. The ritual establishes that the entire congregation has metaphorically shared in the repast.⁶⁶ Following the meal, an amateur play on a theme befitting the holiday (composed each year especially for the celebration) is presented. This element will be handled in chapters four and five.

After the play is enacted, a number of complementary activities are performed in front of the assembled guests. These components focus directly on the *rebe* and take place on and around the table. The post-play activities often begin with group singing.

⁶⁵Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 113.

⁶⁶For a description of this ritual, called *shirayim*, see Wertheim, "Shirayim," in *Law and Custom*, 252-254. See also Mintz, *Hasidic People*, 277.

Just as the *rebe* sang to the assembled at the start of the event, the actors who have just performed the *purimshpil* respond and conclude their production by singing to the leader. While they may begin their singing from a place on the proscenium stage, inevitably, the singers move together toward the *rebe* so that eventually, they are standing before him on the tabletop.

Following the singing to the *rebe*, men will line up to petition him to intercede with God in some matter on their behalf. This ritual, called *kvitlach* (notes), is an aspect of the *rebe's* responsibility to his community of Hasidim. The *rebe* is concerned with the individual lives of his followers and as such, may be asked to help them resolve personal problems. The *rebe* may assist with ill health, lack of fertility, finding matches for the Hasid's children, or any one of a number of other predicaments. Purim is considered a providential time to bring dilemmas such as these to the attention of the *rebe*. The origin of the custom is unclear, but is believed to have been established by the time of the founder of the third wave of Hasidism, in the mid-1700s.⁶⁷ One by one, men make their way to the *rebe*, who is still seated in his chair. The giving of notes begins

⁶⁷Wertheim, "Pidyon Nefesh and Kvitl" in *Law and Custom*, 241-248.

with those that have acted or carried out other roles in the *purimshpil*, and then widens to include other spectators. The men kneel down to shake the leader's hand and often press into it a note (*kvitl*) with a written request, along with an offering of charity.⁶⁸ The money given to the *rebe* is referred to as *pidyon hanefesh* (redemption of the soul) and is considered a debt paid by the believer for the redemption of the soul of himself and his family members.⁶⁹ For this reason, the request bears the supplicant's mother's name as well as his/her own. The *kvitl* is considered, in the words of Jerome Mintz, to be a "line of supernatural communication which may lead back several generations or leap far ahead in to the future."⁷⁰ The *rebe* hears each entreaty and speaks to each petitioner. Occasionally, a congregant may lie down on his stomach before the *rebe* and make the supplication in a gesture of reverence or submission (fig. 7).⁷¹ That Bobover Hasidim conduct this custom on Purim is possibly connected to a verse in *the Book of Esther* in which the Jew Mordecai refuses prostrate himself to Haman, his

⁶⁸*Rebes* are believed to have the ability to cause miracles to happen.

⁶⁹Wertheim, *Law and Custom*, 243. See Wertheim, *Law and Custom*, 108.

⁷⁰Women may pass along a note through one of their male relatives. Jerome Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim: An Introduction to Hasidic Culture and Oral Tradition in the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968), 108.

⁷¹It is interesting to note that in 2001, the new configuration of the *rebe's* seat on the high dais prevented petitioners from speaking to him from a position of

superior (the vizier of Ahasuerus).⁷² The custom, may in fact be a Purim inversion, whereby the followers invert Mordecai's refusal and thereby show profound deference to their leader. Indeed, the custom attests to the deep reverence Hasidim have for the *rebe*.

Just as Jews are obliged to send portions of charity to the poor, the *rebe* will hear every request on Purim from those in need. Usually, the acceptance of these notes, a form of holding court, is carried out privately at specified times at the *rebe's* premises.⁷³ On Purim, however, the custom is conducted publicly, on the *rebe's tish*, and therefore takes on a ceremonious (and performative) air. While the *rebe* is accepting notes, others in the room will stand on the benches, shoulder to shoulder, facing the leader until the *rebe* has spoken to each supplicant. By this point, many other spectators in both the men and women's sections have left. Other than one or two hundred *yeshivah* students watching, or those on the table waiting in line, there may be few viewers left (see fig. 8). On Schechner's

full bodily prostration. Instead, supplicants leaned over the waist-high table to speak to the leader.

⁷²Esther 3:2. Though the reasons for Mordecai's refusal are not stated in the text, there is a long tradition of exegesis of this verse. The most convincing has to do with tribal enmity: "Mordecai will not humble himself to a scion of Israel's archetypal enemy." For this, and other theories, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 41-46.

⁷³Wertheim, *Law and Custom*, 247f.

continuum of theatrical activity, the final elements of the *purimshpil* performance have moved back toward ritual from the direction of pure art.⁷⁴

After the petitioning is completed, the *rebe* recites the final blessing over the completed meal. At this point, there remains one final celebratory activity to conclude the evening's festivities. The smaller group of men--often *yeshivah* students--who are still in the *bes medresh* at this hour, dance ecstatically, encircling the *rebe* while singing traditional tunes. Participants form a snake-like line around the *rebe* and dance, with him standing in the center, so that many people in the circle will have the chance to see and perhaps speak to or touch the leader. At this point, some of those dancing with the *rebe* may experience feelings of ecstasy. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rightly describes this element this as the "true peak of intensity." She explains, "susceptibility to intense religious experiences is enhanced by the fatigue, alcohol, the mesmerizing repetitiveness of song and dance, and the gradual build up of intensity."⁷⁵ This final activity, which may be distantly related to the final revels of the court masques, continues for a half an hour or longer, until the *rebe*

⁷⁴Schechner, "6 Axioms," 41.

⁷⁵Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Hasidic Celebrations of Purim," 113.

suddenly leaves.⁷⁶ The exit of this leading dramatis persona abruptly concludes the festivities. The remaining crowd disperses at once.

While the performative action has ended, the dramatic event has not. Like all theatre, the *purimshpil* is an ephemeral activity. Once performed, any given version ceases to exist. However, each rendition can live on in the consciousness of its audience individually and in that of the community collectively. In fact, it is in the *purimshpil's* afterlife that the event may have its foremost impact. For example, the filial regard demonstrated by the audience for the *rebe* is fortified by memories and conversations among community members long after the performance has concluded.⁷⁷ In addition, the sense of fellowship and connection between community members that is both engendered and reinforced by the performance lasts long after the Purim holiday.

⁷⁶While the final revels of the court masques were often part of the dramatic narrative, as here they are not, I find striking the similarity between the final scenes--a dance with court leader--in both the masque and the *purimshpil*. Cf., Orgel, *Jonsonian Masque*, 26-27. For a discussion of the development of the revels as part of the court entertainments, see Wyckham, "Mummings, Disguisings and Masques," 159-166.

⁷⁷In a discussion with Mrs. Rose Aftergut, wife of the director of the plays, she said that her husband still keeps the silver dollar given to him as a token of appreciation from the *rebe* after each of the play performances. Personal communication with author, 11 March, 2001.

As in folk theatre everywhere, the themes and images presented are an index of the experience and concerns of the community. While the tabletop frames the theatrical activity and provides the physical anchor to the *purimshpil*, the words spoken collectively around the table provide the emotional nourishment to the community of participants. The playlets are dramatic offerings whose subject—the survival of the Jewish people through faith in God and Jewish law—is presented onstage. Thus, the *purimshpil's* afterlife can be regarded by the energy it creates in inspiring group members to affirm of the Bobover way of life. Audience members accomplish this when they return from the *tish* reinvigorated, to the practice of Jewish law in their daily lives. At home and in the months after the *purimshpil*, congregants naturally discuss the performance. In the following chapter, I examine the *purimshpil* narratives to explore the rhetorical content of the symbolic meal that is enjoyed by the celebrant at the *rebe's tish*.

Chapter IV: Table Talk: Purimshpil Narratives

The triumphant nature of every banquet renders it not only a fit conclusion but also a framework for a number of essential events . . . but the banquet is even more important as the occasion for wise discourse, for the gay truth.¹

Mikhail Bakhtin

Words at table are charged with meaning. Be it the prayer of grace said by a host before dinner, or use of the table as stage for a drama during Purim, the taking of food provides an occasion for significant speech. Speech and banquets often co-exist during festivals. Significantly, the Purim holiday, which accords great importance to feasts, is the only Jewish religious festival that sanctions the performance of plays. Thus, for the Bobover, the discourse around the Purim *tish*, given partially in the form of a play, is different in kind from that of other days of the year.

This chapter examines the narrative texts of the *purimshpiln* in an attempt to convey to the reader the significance of the

¹Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky, tran. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 283.

conversation taking place in this ethnic performance. However, a purely textual analysis, divorced from the folk life that gave rise to it, can impart only a small portion of the semiotic meanings engendered by the *purimshpil* custom. Therefore, even while this chapter is concerned primarily with the basic verbal texts comprising the theatrical artifact, I attempt to analyze, throughout, those elements that are not based in language, but that nonetheless provide the context of the rhetorical components. For example, in describing the fictive worlds created onstage, I analyze dramatic structure, genre, and dialogue, illustrating how the forms these take in the Purim plays relate to other dramatic texts created for the stage. This chapter attempts to demonstrate the connection between these dramatic components and the folk customs that give the verbal texts their unique form.

At the same time, I study the non-canonical speech that is essential to the *purimshpil* custom, as well as the amateur aesthetic that determines the ultimate literary form of the plays.

Furthermore, in discussing the subjects of the plays I seek to understand the context within which audience reception takes

place, demonstrating how the reflexive arena created by the theatrical experience affects this group both as an integral audience at the event and as a closely aligned community in its social milieu. (These analyses are not to be confused with the explication of performance practices, yet another layer of important information that will be handled in the next chapter). The verbal analysis herein culminates in an illustration of the significance of the *purimshpil* texts as discourses of spiritual communion within a community of faith.

I view the narratives presented at the Purim table as a part of a tradition of festival speech. As a performance of a dramatic narrative, the *purimshpil* is a discourse whose stories exist in the realm of illusion. Yet, the seriousness of the play world cannot be underestimated. As elucidated by Kurt Riezler in an article entitled "Play and Seriousness," "things, in their relation to us, are surrounded by a horizon that depends on our attitude toward them."² In the Bobover tradition, stories of suffering and martyrdom are common *purimshpil* subjects. While the narratives

²Kurt Riezler. "Play and Seriousness." *Journal of Philosophy* 38:19 (Sept 1941): 505-517, quotation at 511.

may be biblical, historical, or contemporary, ultimately every play is a serious meditation on the themes of Jewish survival and individual redemption. Though the illusionistic world of the play is removed phenomenologically from the everyday social milieu of the audience members, it is at the same time deeply connected to their discernible interests.

Moreover, the revival of the tradition of combining the *tish* with a drama has exerted a powerful impact on the rebuilt Bobover community in the United States. The struggle of the community to come to terms with the Holocaust of World War II, which wreaked havoc on the Bobover community in Europe, has been aided by the *purimshpil* tradition. The effect it has had on the group extends beyond the function of providing entertainment. Specific examples will show that the *purimshpil* custom has provided Bobover members a means of acknowledging the community's own history. This process, in turn, has given a sense of affirmation and validation to the group. Thus, the custom attests to the power of folk theatre as a means of regenerating and contributing positively to the life of a community. Indeed, the dramatic world created by the play ultimately affects even the Bobover social milieu.

According to Reizler, "art, whether playful or not, is never merely play."³ This assertion is exemplified by the way in which the *purimshpil* affects the Bobover social realm.

The reversals required during the Purim holiday bring to prominence the popular element of folk life. The tables are turned, and the people are charged with the task of preparing an entertainment for the *rebe's* benefit. The *purimshpil* can be viewed as festival speech of a non-canonical sort—an expression of the folk. Yet the amateur thespians do not prepare a play merely for play's sake. As created by the Bobover, the *purimshpil* is a wise discourse that has relevance to the Purim festival. Further, its atmosphere both derives from and resembles the carnivalesque spirit that reigned during the medieval European Christian festival before Lent.

The *tish*, with the *rebe* at its head, from where he holds forth, is the weekly celebratory banquet of the Hasidic community family. One of the features that contributes to its unique nature is the folk aesthetic that the table promotes. Bakhtin has demonstrated that Rabelais's folk characters repeatedly speak with profound candor at

³*Ibid.*, 515.

banquets. In medieval culture the gay truth could be said “only in the atmosphere of the banquet, only in table talk.”⁴ The *tish* functions as the Hasidic equivalent of the Rabelaisian feast—a frame for the speaking of wise words; the table around which one can speak the deepest truths. This forum of assembly creates a magic circle, by which the community can look inward, toward their leader and their fellows for spiritual guidance and affirmation. On Purim, this reflexive activity extends to the reception of the drama given on the table. Phenomenologist Bert States explains the resonance of the idea of the magic circle for theatre:

The special significance of the circle metaphor is that theatre is the one place where society collects in order to look upon itself as a third-person other. . . . Theatre is a means of looking objectively at the subjective life of the race as something prepared for the community out of the substance of its own body.⁵

In this formulation, theatre provides perhaps the preeminent framework in which people can perceive themselves as viewing their own lives as detached observers.

⁴Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 285.

⁵Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 39.

The fictive world created on the *purimshpil* stage, with its necessary mimetic representations, gives community members an opportunity to see themselves and their fellows reflected in the corporeal characters and the unfolding action onstage. This reflexive process takes place, in part, as the result of the imaginary relationships that are developed during the performance between actors and spectators, as well as the actual kinship ties between actors and spectators who are members of the same community. The *purimshpil* provides an opportunity for each individual to metaphorically step out of his or her everyday life and its normative rules and regard his or her life from the stance of observer.

This process of spectatorship enables the viewer to imagine him or herself reflected in the characters and situations onstage. Additionally, it provides the onlooker the means to consider, from a point that is extrinsic to the self, the life he or she is striving to live. This too is a shift in dynamics from those in both the weekly *tish* and the pre-play activities of the Purim *tish*, where the focal point is the *rebe*/disciple relationship. In the *purimshpil*, the

magic circle of the banquet table incorporates yet another circle: that of the fictive play.

The *purimshpil*, which takes place within a tradition of festive speech and within the magic circle of the theatre, also shares important characteristics with games and ritual. As such, it is an exceedingly complex form—a practice that could be characterized as emanating from any or all of these disciplines. In fact, the *purimshpil* is properly characterized as located on the nexus of a number of fields rather than within any one. This fact is precisely what makes the *purimshpil* so fertile an activity to investigate and so maddeningly difficult to characterize. Meaning is generated in the interstices of the theatrical, cultural, and anthropological dynamics that make up the performative event. At the same time, the narratives performed at the Purim *tish* reveal a great deal about the conversation the community conducts in its Purim custom.

As a folk theatre form the Bobover *purimshpil* shares with examples of other folklore the features of being at root, non-canonical and non-literary.⁶ Even when a Bobover Purim text is

⁶For an important survey of the major theories attending the study of folk life, See Steve Tillis, "Thinking About Folk Drama," in *Rethinking Folk Drama* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 1-27. See also, Richard Dorson, "Introduction: Concepts of Folklore and Folklife Studies," in *Folklore and*

recorded in words, it is done so after the fact of its performance and as a byproduct of the event. When a *purimshpil* playlet is examined as a written text—i.e. as a drama--that very text does not stand alone but as part of a tradition embedded within a broader performative context. Like other examples of folk expression, the *purimshpil* is “an event in time in which a tradition is performed.”⁷ Divorced from its performance, the text becomes far less than the sum of its parts. In other words, its meaning can be best illuminated only within the context of the conversation it is meant to animate.

The *purimshpil* narratives, however, provide great insight into the table talk at Purim: a special occasion and kind of speech that is part of a conversation the celebrant regards himself to be having with God. Therefore, even when speaking primarily about the verbal elements of the narratives, I hope to present them without distorting their actual role in the production and reception of that conversation. Like the examples of avant-garde drama analyzed by Michael Vanden Heuvel in *Performing Drama*,

Folklife: An Introduction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 1-49, quotation at 45.

⁷Ibid., 45.

Dramatizing Performance, the *purimshpil* is “characterized not by the imposition of meaning by a determinate text upon a stable and passive spectator, but by a dynamic transaction between observer and the observed.”⁸ In the case of the Bobover *purimshpil* the exchange between the texts performed and the folk to whom they are presented is crucial.

What follows in this chapter is an analysis of a theatrical tradition whose creative impulse is largely verbal, though non-literary. This feature of my inquiry is not very different from many other theatrical analyses. The difficulty of describing and the even greater difficulty of assessing the ephemeral theatrical artifact apart from its actual performance has historically posed an obstacle for scholars in the field.⁹ As a result, theorists have frequently concentrated on the easier-to-access, literary aspects of the theatrical product at the expense of the substantial, yet typically unrecorded non-literary elements. This emphasis has led to a valorizing of canonical over unauthorized works in theatre

⁸Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 19.

⁹Steve Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Drama* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 9.

studies.¹⁰ In fact, it has created a dearth of scholarly writing on folk theatre forms, which are, of course, more often than not, based in difficult-to-reconstruct non-verbal theatrical practices.

The analysis of the narratives offered herewith is based on six contemporary Bobover Purim plays for which no written scripts are available.¹¹ Five of these are videotapes of live performances and are available from the Bobover community. As a result of viewing and transcribing the videos, I have reconstructed a script for each performance. However, these manuscripts clearly cannot be regarded as finished Bobover *purimshpil* texts. First, the videos have been minimally yet obviously edited before being released. Secondly, actors in each of the recorded performances regularly improvised lines and stage business. A number of the plays had been performed on occasions previous to the year in which they were recorded and would likely be revived at some point. Obviously, the same play changes substantially over repeated performances, particularly when there is no authoritative script.

¹⁰Marvin Carlson, "The Theory of History," in *The Performance of Power*, ed. Sue Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 272-279.

¹¹According to Moshe Aftergut, the play's director, the community does not write or disseminate scripts of the plays. Interview with the author, 13 May 1998.

Interestingly, after five years of recording and selling the Bobover Purim tapes in their own community, the *rebe* ended the practice of recording the plays. Thus, the available videos remain as indicators of the themes, subjects, and performance practices employed by the community rather than as fixed or authoritative texts *per se*. In the case of one of the plays, I also consulted a scholar's published, descriptive account of the same play in a performance from the late 1970's.¹² One other written script, apparently also transcribed from a video of a live performance, has been published in Yiddish.¹³ Thus, in analyzing the textual elements of the Bobover Purim plays I am in the position of reviewing a largely verbal performance for which the creators have produced no one authoritative script.

Bobover Purim plays tend to be based on historical or scriptural subjects. Biblical themes are popular, but even contemporary plays have historical scenes or elements. An

¹²Shifra Epstein, "The Purim Shpil of Abraham and Issac," In Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen, eds., *The Parade of Heroes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press), 107-117.

¹³Shifra Epstein, comp., "Hananiyah, Mishol and Azariah in the Fiery Furnace." in *The Daniel-Shpil in the Bobover Hasidic Community: Yiddish Texts and Studies* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1998), 81-135. The video of this performance is available for viewing in library of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City.

especially well liked play in the Bobover repertoire is likely to be revived every number of years. In the case of the six plays I looked at for this study, four are based on biblical stories (including the sacrifice of Isaac, the exodus from Egypt, Ashmodai in King Solomon's court, and Daniel in the fiery furnace), one is about both Jewish history and contemporary politics (the Gulf War and Saddam Hussein) and one is about a European Jewish community in the late nineteenth century (the making of a match in the town of Brod). All of these plays can be categorized as *autos*, or myth-plays, which according to Northrop Frye, emphasize "dramatically the symbol of spiritual and corporeal communion."¹⁴ In fact, even non-biblical plays, as will be shown in the forthcoming structural analysis, end by paying homage to the group's spiritual beliefs and actively soliciting God for the redemption of the Jewish people. Therefore, the Bobover plays must ultimately be viewed as religious texts, in the tradition of the *autos sacramentales*.

In renewing the tradition in 1948, of mounting a *purimshpil*, community members relied on their memories of productions that had been given in their hometown of Bobowa, Poland, in pre-

¹⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton

Holocaust Europe.¹⁵ At that time, biblical stories and tales of contemporary politics had been performed. After the survivors of the community had reestablished themselves in the United States, members reconstructed several of the biblical plays that had been performed in the past and loved. This method of play reconstruction has remained a part of the tradition. Music and sometimes dialogue is recycled. In time, new plays based on elements of the tradition were added. Thus, a folk tradition established in pre-war Europe was nurtured and took root in a new, American milieu.

One anomalous play, performed in 1948 directly after the first members of the community had resettled in the United States, bears description. The play, called *In the Time of Conquered Poland*, was performed in three acts and portrayed a family's experience during the Holocaust. Though no script is preserved, the story was reconstructed and described in an article in Yiddish some thirty years after it had been performed.¹⁶ In this play, a

University Press, 1957), 282.

¹⁵Epstein, *The Daniel-Shpil*, 29.

¹⁶Shifra Epstein, "The First Purim Shpil of the Bobover Chasidim in New York after [sic] the Shoa," *Chulyot: Journal of Yiddish Research* (Spring 1996): 317-325. My discussion of this play is based on discussions with Moshe Aftergut, the play's author, and on Epstein's published descriptions.

mother whose husband was taken away by the Nazis endeavors to prevent her son from being taken as well. Though her son is a teenager, she attempts, fooling only herself, to make him resemble a young babe. However, after the sound of boots and a knock on the door is heard, SS officers barge into the home and seize the boy.

Some time afterwards, an SS man returns with a sack, telling the mother her son is inside. The mother nestles the boy to her. When he fails to respond she looks into the sack and finds that it is full of ash. She removes handfuls of ashes from the bag while naming family members who were murdered by the Nazis. She vows to burn everything that can burn, wanting only to join her son as cinder. Yet, as she weeps, she hears the sound of "The Star Spangled Banner" announcing the liberation of Europe. Soon the mother hears another knock on the door. Against all odds, her son walks in, only to tell her that he had escaped the transport and lived out the war as a partisan in the woods. The youth vows never be separated from his mother again.

In some ways, this play was a typical continuation of the pre-war Bobover *purimshpil* tradition. At the request of the *rebe*,

Moshe Aftergut, then a *yeshivah* student (who was himself a Holocaust survivor) put together a script, gathered an all-male cast of four actors, directed, acted in, and produced the play. Like other Purim dramas, the plot featured one essential element—the reversal of fortune in which the Jewish character's lot is resolved well. The play was performed with musical accompaniment provided by community members and featured songs from previous *purimshpiln*.

However, in crucial ways, *In the Time of Conquered Poland* was unlike any other Bobover play. The plot was reminiscent of the very horrors that many in the audience had experienced during the closely proceeding years of the Holocaust.¹⁷ In fact, the play provoked a profound and traumatic psychological reaction in some members of the audience. The inclusion of songs that had been sung by Jews in the ghettos and the use of real prisoner and SS uniforms (brought by community members from Europe) created an intense reaction among spectators. According to testimonies of

¹⁷Directly after the war there were other Jewish celebrations of Purim in which the horrors of the Holocaust were acknowledged in performance. For a particularly interesting account see Toby Blum-Dobkin, "The Landsberg Carnival: Purim in a Displaced Persons Center," in *Purim: The Face and the Mask* (New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 1979), 52-58.

those in attendance, men and women broke down in tears.¹⁸ The *rebe* ruled that plays representing the Holocaust directly should not be performed. Instead, he requested that Aftergut return to presenting plays modeled on those that had been given in Europe before the war.

Epstein asserts that the play *In the Time of Conquered Poland* functioned, for some, as a psychodrama that fulfilled a need in the survivors to purge the feelings of deep psychic despair that so many Bobover members wrestled with directly after the Holocaust.¹⁹ At the same time, she surmises that the *rebe* believed that directly representing the horrors of the Holocaust on a theatrical stage was an experience too difficult to for some survivors to undergo. She further states that the *rebe* wanted to restore a sense of normalcy to the life of the community and believed that returning to the traditional *purimshpil* subjects would help produce that effect.²⁰

¹⁸This play and its effect on the community is described (in Hebrew) in Epstein, *Yiddish Texts*, 29-32.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 31.

²⁰*Ibid.*

The retiring of the script of *In the Time of Conquered Poland* raises a number of questions about the role of the *purimshpil* in the community's experience. The *rebe's* decision to forbid future performances of this play reflects on the nature of the *purimshpil* custom under this *rebe's* guardianship. In moving the community away from direct representation of the Holocaust, the leader provided (perhaps tacit) recognition of the role of theatre in the life of the community. States's aforementioned notion of the theatre as a reflexive arena occasioned by a group's coming together to look upon itself from the stance of third-person other depends on aesthetic distance. In fact, the magic circle cannot function as such if there is no distance between its symbolical sphere and reality. The traumatic reaction to the 1948 Bobover play was caused, on the part of at least some audience members, by the absence of the very distance that would have helped them to regard even their own experience as something apart from themselves. In directly invoking the audience's life experience on the theatrical stage, the play apparently restimulated the audiences' experiences of their own still felt trauma. The performance crossed the threshold between reality and illusion,

and in seeming all too real again, deprived the audience of the experience of regarding their life from a stance of objectivity.

In other words, the symbolical arena of the theatre depends on illusion. In fact, in banning that first play-script, the *rebe* did not forbid all other references to the Holocaust on the *purimshpil* stage. Chapter six discusses ways in which the play's creators purposefully include allusions to the Holocaust in almost every Bobover Purim play. In these later plays, as we shall see, the Holocaust, which is not directly invoked, permeates the consciousness of audience members even in plays about other subjects.

Two types of *purimshpil* texts are typically presented in the Bobover community. Biblical plays, the most popular kind, faithfully reenact episodes from the Jewish sources. Another category referred to by the community as skits, rather than *purimshpiln*, tend to be lighthearted in tone, are wholly created by community members, and tell stories of Jewish life.²¹ Note that from the point of view of the theatre specialist, skits and *purimshpiln* are the same. The designation refers to the

²¹Epstein, *Yiddish Texts*, 32-36.

community's internal sense of the importance or relative worth of a particular play. During some years, for example, community or familial obligations, (either of the *rebe* or of the members who put the *purimshpiln* together) make them unable to put as much time and effort into a production. During those years, they tend to stay away from biblical themes, producing, instead, what they designate as skits. One Bobover woman, in speaking to me of the playlet given in 1999 said, "The *rebe* was sick, he really couldn't sit. That year, they just did a skit." Similarly, in Feb. 2001, approximately one month before Purim, when I asked what kind of play they would be doing, they told me that the *rebe* was in Israel at the time, and they would probably be doing a skit. However, the play finally given had the same basic structure of a *purimshpil*. The main difference was that they did not attempt to stage a biblical story.

Whether *purimshpiln* or skits, all plays are presented at the *tish* and all have the requisite feature of demonstrating an act of God in which the troublesome lot of a Jewish character or community is resolved happily. Both types of plays are commonly comprised of an introduction, a number of episodes, one or more comic interludes, and a finale. All texts weave musical

accompaniment together with spoken dialogue, monologues, sung prayers, choral selections, Hasidic songs (*nigunim*), and arias performed by soloists.

Since one or two community members construct the texts in consultation with the *rebe*, there is always an educational aspect to the work. Over the last twenty years, the primary responsibility for writing the plays has been the domain of community member Rabbi Shulim Kessler. According to Hasidic tradition, time that could be devoted to study should not be spent in frivolous pursuits. Thus, in writing the Purim plays, Rabbi Kessler endeavors to create an educational or moral presentation, gleaning his ideas from study of the bible, reading Yiddish folk stories or other Yiddish literary sources such newspapers published by and for the ultra-orthodox community.²² In fact, biblical plays are regarded as the most appropriate *purimshpil* material. When composing a biblical play, such as *The Play of Solomon* or *From Slavery to Freedom*, the working process will include study of the story's source. In the words of one Bobover Hasid,

²²Epstein, "The Daniel-Shpil," 34-35.

You have to understand, this is not just going to see a play—this is a religious experience; a Hasidic Torah experience. It always has a Torah tenor. These are not just plays that someone writes. The *Yosefshpil* [Play of Joseph] is in the *Chumash* [Pentateuch]. *Akedat Yitzchak* [The Sacrifice of Isaac] is in the *Chumash*. . . . we put in the mouth of the character Torah thoughts.²³

Interestingly, the above respondent apparently perceives the dramatic narratives themselves as non-authoritative. In his opinion, however, as concepts from the Bible, these Torah thoughts certainly carry weight. Interesting too is the way in which the speaker, who is an audience member and not a creator of the plays, refers to the author, perhaps unwittingly, as 'we.' In his estimation, the plays were created not only by a writer, but also in a sense, by the community. Their authority rests not in the individuals who dramatized the scriptures nor in those who wrote completely new skits but, in the community, the *rebe*, and ultimately, in God.

As Stephen Orgel has shown in his essay "What is a Text?" the authority of a performing text does not only derive from the author, but from the company and its owners as well.²⁴

²³Shlomo Gutter (Bobover Hasid), telephone conversation with author, 19 September 2000.

²⁴Stephen Orgel, "What is a Text?" in *Staging the Renaissance: Interpretation of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Sallibrass (New York: Routledge, 1991), 83-87.

Renaissance playwrights regularly wrote scripts to reflect patron wishes and rewrote scripts to reflect (and at times, to deflect) performed versions.²⁵ Today similarly, financial and technical constraints are only two of the many ingredients that may help generate the nature of an author's written text.²⁶ In the case of the Bobover, community members have not felt the need to produce a written script as a measure of authority. Authority rests with the *rebe*. However, in preparing a play for production, texts considered authoritative exist much in the way the scenarios of the sixteenth century Italian *commedia dell' arte* endured at the time of those performances. Whether remembered in memory or simple notations, the Bobover have specific plot requirements for biblical plays. In fact, they consider these plays holy and insist that the dramatizations adhere to particular narrative story lines in the scriptures.²⁷ Thus, some measure of permanence is established by the structural form each play takes. In addition, practical restraints

²⁵Ibid., 83-84.

²⁶One need review the performance history of Samuel Beckett's plays to understand how easily, even sacrosanct texts are refashioned to reflect the sensibilities of others that may be producing, directing or viewing them. See, for example Jonathan Kalb, "Underground Staging in Perspective," in *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 71-94.

²⁷Epstein, "The Daniel-Shpil," 34.

help to determine the form of the playscripts. At most, two weeks of rehearsals are scheduled with the cast before any performance thus minimizing time spent neglecting the study of Torah.

Therefore, plays must conform to a structure that is highly adaptable and easy to activate. Music and sometimes dialogue is recycled but the structure is fairly consistent--a subject to which I now turn.

The *purimshpil* invariably opens with a narrator speaking through a microphone, in Yiddish, directly to the audience from a position behind the curtain.²⁸ Giving thanks those who put the play together, the narrator announces the title of the work and delivers important expository information. Often this formula will be repeated before each major scene. In the case of the 1989 production of *The Play of Solomon the King*, the narrator recited the biblical verses in Hebrew—complete with citations—from which the plots of the scenes were taken. (I have italicized the verses given in Hebrew). In this way, he also introduced the characters and framed the events that were to be presented:

²⁸In the videotapes, the prologues are given as voice-overs and the screen remains blue until a graphically created curtain opens on the first scene.

In honor of Purim Taf/Shin/Bet/Het (1989), we will present a historical event. It is called by name The Play of Solomon the King. I will ask, during the whole play, to be quiet. I thank the boys and the young people who put so much strength in the play.

I want to express a special “may you be strengthened” to Moshe Aftergut for the huge amount of time that he put in to put together this play on the part of the Initiator and Doer of Good.

Kings: Chapter A-D. So Solomon was king over all Israel. And Benaiah son of Jehoiada over the army. And God gave wisdom and considerable understanding to Solomon.

Now we will see how and in which way the wisdom that Solomon used not only for himself and his own nation, but as is written: *And they came from all of the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon in the time of Solomon's kingdom. So sat Judah and Israel . . . each man under his grapevine and under his fig tree.*

Let us go into the palace of the king.²⁹

In the above prologue, a mixture of Yiddish and Hebrew, one that is unique to the plays, is used. The verses of scripture are pronounced in an oratorical, declamatory style that is more formal than the line readings in the rest of the text. This opening sets up

²⁹*The Play of Solomon the King*, full text of a video produced by Abraham Knobloch and directed by Moshe Aftergut (New York: Freedman's Photography), 1989.

both the first scene of the *purimshpil* and the association of the play with study.³⁰ While not all Bobover texts open in such a didactic manner, each introduction puts forth the educational component of the play.

In every *purimshpil*, the narrative introduction is followed directly by the enactment of the scene or scenes mentioned. The 1992 production *M'Avdus L'Cheirus* (From Slavery to Freedom) is typical. The play retells the biblical story of the Exodus. The Passover story has always been a favorite *purimshpil* subject. In fact, there exists intertextuality between the two holidays, which has often led to Purim illustrations on *Hagaddot* and Purim parodies concerning the *Hagaddah*.³¹ In the Bobover rendition, the story follows the major narrative outlines found in the Bible with each scene corresponding to a biblical verse.

The play opens with Pharaoh asking his advisors what to do about the problem of the Hebrews, who have become too numerous

³⁰Indeed, the texts of plays designated as *purimshpiln* (i.e. those telling a biblical story) are later viewed and studied by girls in Bobover schools.

³¹Ahuva Belkin, "Habit De Fou in Purimshpil?" in *ASSAPH: Studies in Theatre*, 2 (Section C 1985): 40-51.

in the land of Egypt.³² As the play progresses, the biblical story is faithfully told, beginning with the decree that the Hebrew children be thrown in the river. Scenes of the hard labor imposed on the slaves by the Egyptians are presented against those of the internecine Jewish fighting, which is reprovved by Moses. The image of Moses as a shepherd tending his flock of Hebrews leads to a scene depicting the burning bush and God's instructions to Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. When Moses hesitates to take up the task, God drafts Aaron to speak for his brother. God's directive that the Hebrews sacrifice in the desert as an offering to His Name is represented as a prelude to the various plagues and to Pharaoh's intransigence. The play's climax, of course is the emergence of the Hebrews from slavery into freedom.

An audience member could presumably follow along with a bible and detect the verses as they are performed. Fidelity to the biblical narrative is maintained as the scenes unfold in a linear fashion that corresponds to the events in the Bible.³³ Virtually every person in the audience is intimately familiar with the story,

³²Ex. 1:8-13.

³³The scenes correspond to Ex. 1:22, 1:13, 2:13-14, 2:17, 3:2-9, 3:11, 4:11-13, 5:3-6, 7:20-22, 7:27, 8:13-14, 10:21, 11:2-6 and 12:33

having studied the biblical Exodus text and read the tale yearly in the Passover *Hagaddah*. Thus, the enacting of this legend functions to mirror to the audience an event that they regard as a central episode in their history. In the view of the spectators, their own ancestors are symbolically put on stage where they enact events considered paradigmatic in Jewish history. The Passover *Hagaddah* enjoins every Jew to see himself as having personally been enslaved in Egypt and redeemed by God. Dramatizing the story in a public way intensifies the audience's perception of that history.

The play does not attempt a chapter and verse dramatic reenactment of every scene mentioned in Exodus, but is instead, divided into a European-like play structure of four acts plus an interlude. The scenes alternate between Pharaoh's court and the desert and are thus, reminiscent of the technique in some Shakespearean plays of alternating between court and the green world of nature.³⁴ Just as Shakespeare's court and forest represent

³⁴Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. John Halliday (1988; Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 259.

different values, in this play, court and desert each evoke particular associations: the gentile oppressive activity in the court versus the Jewish plight in the desert. The scenes at court tend to be comic in tone. Pharaoh, played by a gifted actor, is the comic foil. On the other hand, pictures of the Jewish predicament in the desert are serious to maudlin. Scenes that depict God speaking to his people are staged as wonders with the melodramatic stage effects of crashing thunder and flashing lights.

Indeed, all Bobover plays can be said to contain an intermingling of tones. In any given year, a play is likely to contain comic, farcical, melodramatic, and tragic elements. The attitudes of both characters and action shifts from scene to scene. For example, *From Slavery to Freedom* contains musical jokes, as when "Hail to the Chief" is played upon Pharaoh's entrance. The dialogue is often witty, lightly mocking members of the community, and acerbic when aimed at members of other groups (both Jewish and gentile). Pharaoh, the anti-hero, humorously uses exaggerated speech and body movements in all scenes. In fact, most action centers on this character, and almost all of the comic action within the play's four acts involves him. This actor is also the foil for God's wrath. He

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withstands the fury of the ten plagues, which, rendered farcically (with each plague increasing in magnitude and tempo) are highlights of the show. Audience members, particularly children, laugh with glee as the monarch trips in the dark and falls into a huge tub of water. The laughter becomes a roar during the plague of frogs when he finds a large frog in his hat and is subsequently inundated with live, jumping frogs.

Yet, humorous scenes such as those described here are interspersed with pictures more serious in nature. During scenes of Jewish suffering Hasidic melodies are sung and background music is used to set a solemn tone. For example, when Pharaoh decrees that all first born sons are condemned to die, the recorded sound of a baby crying is played loudly over the sound system. In the background, a child's voice is heard singing a song of lament to his mother. This scene changes the mood of the audience. As spectators get quiet, the curtain opens to reveal two Hebrews in the hot desert sun. Suffering from heat and the lack of water, the characters discuss their fate as slaves. One sings a mournful melody to God asking for help. The other begins to faint. Just then, a young boy enters saying, "Father, father I heard you yell."

The boy sings a plaintive song to his father. Seeing his son, the father feels revived. After the boy leaves, the father sings a sad melody with the following lyrics:

In the middle of the hardest work,
The mother is looking for a saving for her child.
The one above is going to remember us.

To pull out of nothing a something,
Because unfortunately, there is going to be
The beginning of a terrible thing.

My life is hard, my heart is hard.
My friends and those before me,
And my trials were ordered for me.

To listen to our voices, now we are being shown
God will come and redeem us. ³⁵

This song is poignant, particularly when regarded in the context Bover history and Purim theology. For members of this community of faith, many of whom are survivors and children of survivors, the trials ordered by God for the Hebrews resonate with the tribulations they endured at the hands of the Nazis.

³⁵*From Slavery to Freedom*, full text of a video produced by Abraham Knobloch and directed by Moshe Aftergut (New York: Freedman's Photography), 1992.

Moreover, lines such as "To pull out of nothing a something" relate directly to Purim theology. The *Book of Esther* retells the story of a miraculous redemption of the Jewish people at the hands of their enemies. Astonishingly, the name of God is not mentioned in the narrative. Contemporary commentators, as discussed in Chapter II, have seen in God's apparent absence a sign of the story's secular nature. However, there is another and more well-developed tradition of exegesis that argues exactly the opposite. That is, despite the fact that humans are incapable of recognizing the Almighty's work in the interstices--for these are the hidden aspect of God's face--the Jews' release from the results of Haman's decree is a sign of His very presence in the events that unfolded. Hasidic theology establishes that God is immanent in all things, even when He seems to be turned away from his people.³⁶ So too, according to Fox, the author of *Esther* "is teaching a theology of possibility. The willingness to face history with openness to the possibility of providence--even when history seems to weigh against

³⁶The doctrine of God's immanence in all things is considered by Gershom Scholem to be the distinguishing characteristic of modern Hasidism. See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 347-348.

its likelihood . . . is a stance of profound faith.³⁷ Most certainly, these audience members are deeply aware of the possibility of God's ability to 'pull a something from a nothing.' They, or others close to them, may even be alive today and in the audience because of what they experienced as a *deus ex machina*. Clearly, for the Bobover, as for all Hasidim, God's inevitable, but partially hidden presence in the machinery of the world is an incontrovertible act (and fact) of faith.

In adopting a theatrical form for the expression of a biblical narrative, the Bobover have correspondingly adapted elements of a number of dramatic genres to suit their needs. As noted, tragedy, comedy, farce, and melodrama are all represented. However, no one genre can completely claim the *purimshpil* as its own. For example, each Bobover play must end with the redemption of the protagonists. Therefore, the denouement always moves in an upward direction, suggesting comedy and precluding its classification as tragedy. Yet despite the farcical elements used to generate levity in specific scenes, the plays' endings lack the

³⁷Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 247. For a review of the major interpretations of God's hidden nature and His silence in the *Book of Esther*, see *Ibid.*, 235-247.

exuberant ambiance which is characteristically the prelude to a final comic celebration in the theatre. In fact, the situations handled in the plays (many of them dictated by the biblical scriptures) are often of great gravity. Appropriately, the *purimshpil's* finale is customarily serious in tone. In fact, Frye's observation—that the myth-play tends to pensiveness—surely describes the mood of the final episodes of the Bobover plays.³⁸ In the spirit of Purim, the plays embrace both sadness and gaiety.

Indeed, the *purimshpil* typically juxtaposes solemnity and levity, creating a tragicomic mood. However, this is not the smooth blending of tragic and comic elements—the "mixed mood" that Ruby Cohn posits as the salient characteristic of modern tragicomedy.³⁹ Instead, these elements alternate, generating a seesawing emotional attitude that resembles what Alan Downer describes as the doubled sensibility of tragicomedy in the post-Elizabethan period.⁴⁰ Like the new genre of that age, the *purimshpil* gives voice to a perspective infused by a dual

³⁸Frye, *Anatomy*, 282.

³⁹Ruby Cohn, "The Mixed Mood," in *Currents in Contemporary Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 154-197.

⁴⁰Alan Downer, "Panoramic Drama: The Third Movement," in *The British Drama: A Handbook and Brief Chronicle* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950), 158-171.

consciousness. The Purim holiday simultaneously acknowledges the possibilities of doom and deliverance. Similarly the Hasidic worldview is as profoundly linked to the idea of messianic redemption as it is to the acknowledgement of human loss. The *purimshpil* expresses the tensions inherent in those two opposites, creating scene after scene which move the audience, in ping pong fashion, between emotionally opposite poles. As such, it resembles Renaissance tragicomedy, which, according to Downer, came to be popular in a court society “increasingly burdened by social and political troubles.”⁴¹ In Downer’s view, Renaissance tragicomedy, however, ran the risk of turning into melodrama, a form with which it was closely identified.⁴²

On some levels, the *purimshpil* can be viewed as melodramatic drama, sharing as it does a number of essential features with that genre. Like the plays discussed by Daniel Gerould in the introduction to *American Melodrama*, the Bobover Purim plays are “designed for . . . audiences ignorant of artistic tradition and indiscriminating in matters of culture, but avid for

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 162.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 165.

robust entertainment and rudimentary moral instruction.”⁴³ The acting is broad and staged stories (and practices, as will be discussed in the next chapter) are borrowed from a variety of sources.⁴⁴ The plays are put together by practitioners untutored in theatre arts, but who, none-the-less, have the “ability to stage strong situations and convey powerful emotions theatrically.”⁴⁵ This, according to Gerould, was the requisite skill needed to stage the nineteenth century American melodramas that garnered such mass appeal. In fact, formulas similar to those used by American theatre practitioners during the heyday of theatrical melodrama aid the Bobover playmakers.

Every Bobover play, for example, dramatizes a struggle between good and evil.⁴⁶ The Purim play is a symbolic realm, where poetic justice is finally meted out after the battle is waged.⁴⁷ As in standard melodrama, there is regularly an unexpected rescue,

⁴³Daniel Gerould, ed., “Introduction,” *American Melodrama* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1983), 8.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁶Ira Hauptman, “Defending Melodrama,” in *Themes in Drama: Melodrama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 281-289.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 288.

though here, it is wrought by God rather than the hero alone.⁴⁸

Often, the plays will employ time-honored melodramatic techniques to move the plot forward. Coincidence, mistaken identity, and the form's stock characters—the amoral villain, the noble hero and children in distress—appear repeatedly.⁴⁹ As theatre scholar Ira Hauptman affirms,

Melodrama. . . sees life as a field for the struggle of eternal impulses of good and evil. The variety of dramatic patterns possible is limited, and the same moments keep recurring from play to play as the same conflict works itself out.⁵⁰

Hauptman's assertion applies to the Bobover plays, which tell essentially the same story every year. Each play pits an evil (non-Jewish) antagonist against a noble Jewish protagonist. The non-Jewish character customarily attempts to prevent the Jewish characters from following the will of their God.

In each case, however, God enables the Jewish heroes to prevail. In *The Play of Daniel*, for example, King Nebuchadnezzar personifies evil. After conquering Jerusalem, he tries forcibly to

⁴⁸Victor Castellani, "Everything to do with Dionysus: *Ur*drama, Euripidean melodrama, and tragedy," in *Themes in Drama: Melodrama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-16.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁰Hauptman, "Melodrama," in *Themes*, 283.

convert the Jewish children Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to Christianity. Changing their names to Shadrach, Mishad and Abednego, the king attempts to convince the children to eat unkosher food. They decline. The monarch then attempts to force the children to bow down to a large golden cross. With God and Daniel behind them, however, the young ones remain steadfast in their beliefs, refusing to bow down. Punishment turns to torture, and Nebuchadnezzar eventually has them thrown into the fiery furnace for their refusal to obey. Yet, even in the fire, the children do not burn. At play's end, stating that "their eternalness is as pure as the faith shines like the sun," the king proclaims that he will convert to their religion.⁵¹

In *The Sacrifice of Isaac* the antagonists, Ishmael and Satan, each try, in their own way, to persuade their rivals—Isaac and Abraham respectively--to refrain from fulfilling their Jewish duties. However, despite doubts, both father and son finally remain true to the Jewish God, even when it seems unthinkable to do so, as when Abraham must sacrifice his beloved Isaac. Plots such as these certainly strike the secular, western audience member as typically

⁵¹Epstein, *The Daniel-Shpil*, 134.

melodramatic in nature. I refrain, however from classifying them purely as such. To their intended audience, the events portrayed seem entirely possible. The following comment of a Bobover Hasid makes clear that he does not experience the plays as melodrama:

The plays are sad with parts that have a lighter motif. These are real events that happened. So if it's a sad event, the plays are sad. If it is a happy event, the play is happy. *Akedat Yitzchakshpil* for example, is a sad event so the play is sad. But in between there are other scenes that are more comic. And they did a play about the *Kantonists*. Do you know what that is? In Russia, they would take boys and draft them into the army for twenty-five years. They tried to get them to forget their Judaism by having them be very far away. It was one of the worst periods in Jewish history. They tried to get them to give up their Judaism but it doesn't work.⁵²

Not only do Bobover members believe literally in the Bible, but also their own recent history has included events that may seem to them very similar to the plots of the plays. Surely, a survivor of the Holocaust who witnessed the gassing of his family members would perceive the fiery kiln of Nebuchadnezzar as tragic rather than as overwrought or exciting melodramatic plotting. A young man raised hearing stories of his grandfather's refusal to

⁵²Shlomo Gutter, telephone conversation with author, 19 September 2000.

give up Judaism despite being drafted into the Russian army for ten years would regard the king's attempt to wean the children from Judaism as a painful reminder of his own family history. The Purim plays are an amalgam of genres, borrowing structural elements from a variety of western theatre models. They do not conform exclusively to any one mode. In the final analysis, their classification as genre depends partially on audience reception.

Bobover biblical plays are particularly long, as they must be staged according to the rationale of educational and moral goals rather than those of art. All the important material contained in the scriptural narrative must be fully and fittingly represented. Thus, it is common for a biblical play to run four, five, or more hours. Even skits, which are not wedded to a biblical story, tend to be two or three hours in duration. To cope with the difficulty of long viewing times, the Bobover have used the practice of the interlude deftly. In a biblical play, a comic sketch will typically be inserted midway to provide a break in the long story and to engender a change of mood in the audience.

In the play *From Slavery to Freedom*, for instance, midway through the evening, two Hasidic spectators in the audience

suddenly begin to argue loudly. Sitting at the edge of the *tish* and dressed in Hasidic garb (thus not wearing costumes), they begin to yell and throw punches at each other. For the moment, the magic circle is ruptured as the startled audience moves its attention from the proscenium stage to the table. The planted combatants quickly climb up on to the table and continue their fight. At this point, the audience recognizes that the altercation is part of the show and the magic circle is restored. Once on the table, they make their way to the stage where they continue their argument in the form of a slapstick, stand-up comedy routine, replete with use of a toilet plunger as a weapon and gags such as one man surreptitiously setting the other on fire. The jokes are both verbal and physical, and their wit and sight gags illicit unabashed laughter from the audience. The fifteen-minute act refreshes the senses of those in the audience and readies the spectators for the second half of the performance. The routine ends on the same subject with which it began—Jewish people fighting one another. When the play resumes, the audience finds Moses thinking aloud about the problem of internecine conflict within the fictional Jewish

community. The interlude leads back into the subject of the play and thus, the audience is brought fully back into the magic circle.

The Purim plays are given in the form of monologues and dialogues with limited action and a slow tempo. Some scenes are delivered in prose and others, or parts of others, in verse. Often, the plots are moved along by arias, sung as part of the action. At other times, a character will sing an aria downstage into a microphone before a closed curtain, creating a further kind of interlude. Often, a play will feature a boy with a superb voice and a scenario will be created to show off his talent to the *rebe* and to an appreciative community audience. Since Bobover women do not sing in public, a boy's voice (before the transition to adulthood) offers a special sound.⁵³ Overall, the performances resemble operettas in which a large portion of the text, though not all, is delivered in song.

The final structural element present in every Bobover Purim play is the song of homage sung to the *rebe* and to God. As in the American musical theatre genre, the entire cast sings this chorus

⁵³I am indebted to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for pointing this out to me in a written communication, 25 May, 1993.

after the play's denouement. As the actors begin to sing the final song, the other members of the company join them onstage. The entire group, including crew, stands facing the *rebe* and sings directly to him. Performers do not bow, nor does the audience clap. However, the final song provides a way for the *rebe* and the audience to recognize those who worked on the production. More importantly, the finale provides a public opportunity for the cast and crew to enjoy the honor of singing directly for the sage. Typically, the final song mentions the people's hope that the Messiah will come. The singers wish a happy Purim to all present, and acknowledge the *rebe* specifically. The finale from the *Play of Daniel* is representative:

We praise the Creator with all kinds of
 praises.
 Delivery from the hand of angels
 Our father who is in heaven
 God who is our soul in life
 He never let our legs fail us,
 You saved us from a sure death.
 All nations have recognized your greatness,
 Because we did not get burned.

Everyone knows your greatness
 And they will ask in the prayers.
 He who answered Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,
 At the same time,
 Should answer us

And tell us,
 To go and meet the Messiah of our righteousness!
 Our rabbi who leads us with melodies and songs
 And for everyone a luminescent Purim!!!⁵⁴

The *purimshpil* finale, while similar in structure to that of the American musical theatre, has none of the exuberance typical of that genre. Paradoxically, the *purimshpil* finale, inevitably concludes in a subdued and contemplative manner. The exultation of Purim always exists alongside the memory of a difficult past and the hope of redemption in the future.

Stock characters are another element of the *purimshpil* that have a direct relationship to western dramatic forms. Broadly speaking, there are two basic types of characters in the Bobover repertoire. Serious figures such as heroes and children are always God-fearing, noble, and Jewish. Biblical heroes such as Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Aaron, King Solomon, and the Messiah exemplify the moral or ethical virtues the play aims to teach. For example, Abraham and Isaac demonstrate devotion, Abraham to God and

⁵⁴"The Play of Daniel," in *The Daniel-Shpil in the Bobover Hasidic Community*, ed. Shifra Epstein (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1998), 80-135 quotation at 134-135.

Isaac to his father. Abraham is a wise and loving father who suffers the fate of being tested by God. Isaac is portrayed as an innocent boy, good at his studies, readily obedient to his father but susceptible to the negative influence of his wild half-brother Ishmael. In skits, Jewish characters tend to be ordinary people. These are generally stereotypical figures: poor but good rabbis, rich but gauche businessmen, brilliant poor *yeshivah* students who all get caught up in humorous plots of domestic intrigue.

While serious characters embody values thought to be positive in the Hasidic community (such as affinity for learning), comic characters generally personify perceived traits of non-Hasidic culture. Henri Bergson maintained that the comic “expresses, above all, a lack of adaptability to society.”⁵⁵ In the case of the Bobover plays, the comic characters express a lack of adaptability to *Hasidic* society. Thus, the audience can laugh at characters that embody all manner of attributes inconsistent with the Bobover way of life.

⁵⁵Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” in *Comedy*, with Introduction and Appendix by Wylie Sypher (1956; reprint, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 146.

For example, big-bellied Ishmael works some of the richest comic moments in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. This character proves he is an unworthy son to Abraham. Ishmael spends his time doing belly dances and hunting wild beasts with a big bow and arrow, acts that on stage are amusing to the audience. The spectators know that as a good Jewish boy (and like his younger brother Isaac) he should be studying Torah and listening to his father. Yet, Ishmael is unable to sit still long enough to learn. He simply cannot understand the Talmudic passages he is required to study. After many chances to make good, which he resists, Ishmael becomes an increasingly bad influence on Isaac.

Ishmael takes Isaac into the woods ostensibly to hunt lions, and shoots arrows at his younger brother instead. At another time, Ishmael intimates to Isaac that he, as Abraham's firstborn, is going to be the recipient of the father's inheritance. A lot of comic mileage is squeezed out of the scenes of sibling rivalry between the boys. This family dynamic is funny to a community of rigorously orthodox Hasidim who put a prime value on the concepts of family and study. Presumably, in Bobover families, where eight children is not an uncommon number of siblings, many audience members can

relate to the familial situation depicted. They may even have rivalrous children who resemble one or the other of the characters on stage.

Finally, Sarah reacts to Ishmael's increasing influence over *her* precious son. Fearing that the older boy will harm Isaac, she prevails upon Abraham to banish Ishmael, along with his mother, to the desert. This leads to a long scene in which Ishmael and Hagar wander in the desert. The actors milk the scene in which the boy almost expires from thirst. When he faints, falling flat on his back, his mountainous belly causes laughter in the audience. Physical comedy generates much of the humor of Ishmael's scenes: his big paunch, the large bow and arrow, the farcical hunting scenes, his grotesque dancing to Arab music all inspire levity. Similarly, Sarah and Hagar, cross-dressed Bobover men, look funny in their padded frocks, wearing headdresses conveniently (though not completely) covering their beards.

Far from being simply a humorous theatrical interpretation of the narrative of *Genesis*, however, all the scenes allude to specific verses of scripture. Viewers familiar with *Genesis* (as virtually every audience member is) can discern specific incidents of biblical

history in the scenes, even when only implied to onstage. In *Genesis* 21:9, for example, Sarah sees Ishmael "making sport." Rashi, the great Medieval commentator notes that the Hebrew verb *mitzakhek*, 'making sport,' is used to denote idolatry, murder, and immorality in other biblical narratives.⁵⁶ Most of the audience members are likely to know this canonical commentary. In *Genesis*, Ishmael is portrayed as one "whose hand shall be against every man."⁵⁷ Sarah fears for her son Isaac and wants to ensure that he receives the inheritance.⁵⁸ At the same time, she is resentful of her handmaiden Hagar who, in bearing Abraham's first son unalterably changed the dynamics of her situation.⁵⁹ In the *purimshpil*, when Sarah sees Ishmael 'making sport,' she demands that Abraham banish the older boy. Although the exegesis of the verb is not undertaken onstage, the spectators know the interpretation from previous biblical study. Thus, for most audience members,

⁵⁶Rev. Dr. A Cohen, ed., *The Soncino Chumash: Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth*, 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 104,f9. It is interesting to note that the root of the verb *metzakhek* is *tsakhak*, (laughed) and the same as the root of the name Isaac (which in Hebrew is *Yitskhak*). The name refers to the reactions—laughter— of both Abraham and Sarah when it was prophesied that they were to have a son. See Gen. 15:17 and Gen. 18:11-15.

⁵⁷Gen. 16:12.

⁵⁸Gen. 21:9-13

⁵⁹Gen. 16:4-7

intertextuality exists between the play as given onstage and the Bible, a text with which they are exceedingly familiar.⁶⁰ Similarly, though the continuing story of Hagar and Ishmael is not fully developed onstage, audience members are well aware that Hagar, through Ishmael, is destined to become the matriarch of a great nation.⁶¹

In *After the Days*, the Messiah gives a group of evil world leaders, including Saddam Hussein, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Fidel Castro one chance to redeem themselves for crimes they have committed against the Jews. Together, they must build a booth

⁶⁰On the other hand, I read one of the scenes of the skit of 2001 as an intertext to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. In the vignette, the Russian Tzar dresses incognito and goes to a pub to speak to soldiers before they go off to battle, much like Hal, and later Henry does in those respective plays. It is unlikely that members of the audience, who do not attend theatre (and do not even have televisions in their homes) would have the same association. I would like, at this point, to reiterate the meaning, for community members, of the term *purimshpil* versus that of skit. For this audience, a play coming out of a biblical story resonates in ways other plays simply cannot. Hence, biblical plays are worthy of the appellation, *purimshpiln*.

⁶¹According to the *Genesis* narrative, Hagar, (the root of the name comes from the Hebrew for stranger, *ger*) an Egyptian, and she who is sent into the desert with her son, survives. She finds for Ishmael a wife in Egypt. See Gen. 16:1 and 21:14-21. Paradoxically, it has been previously foretold that the Hebrews would be strangers in a land not theirs and would suffer servitude there for four hundred years. Gen. 15:13. This land, of course, is Egypt.

(*sukkah*) in preparation for the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. Of course, they do not know the proper customs and laws for building the booth and, after numerous attempts (and many sight gags), the hut collapses. The leaders resort to fisticuffs as the project degenerates to mayhem. Meanwhile the audience, who have presumably all participated in the building of such a booth, laugh heartily at the antics.

Other plays feature all manner of eccentric secondary characters—wizards, Roman guards, eighteenth century French dandies, ridiculous royal advisors such as a Russian Jewish taxi driver from Borough Park, a Black Hip Hopper named Leroy Schwartzman, and a stargazer who is not too bright. These characters supply the topical humor and local context for the productions. Fools are also in great supply. In *A Match in Brod*, the sexton of the synagogue is an eccentric Lithuanian Jew who speaks with a funny accent. Smart and crafty, like his Plautine ancestor, the sexton moves the plot of mistaken identities along. Much of the comedy of this figure is born of the repetitious quirks of culture and personality perceived by this mostly Polish Jewish audience as Lithuanian peculiarities. Thus, the historic intra-Jewish

rivalry between Polish/Hasidic and Lithuanian/non-Hasidic Jews engenders a lot of laughter.⁶²

Usually, the comic characters lack bitterness. As opposed to the portrayal of the reputedly malignant intentions of enemies of the Jews such as Pharaoh or Saddam Hussein, antagonists tend to be portrayed in some (but not all) Bobover plays as more foolish than malevolent. Their main function in the play is to create conflict for the Jewish characters while showing off outlandish costumes and customs. These characters are used to create an atmosphere of levity and exuberance while presenting a morality tale to the audience.

Central to all the textual subject matter discussed so far is an apparently keen recognition of, if not a preoccupation with, self and other. The Purim plays constructed by the Bobover community always present a story of Jewish history to its own faithful community. Invariably, Hasidic and Jewish characters exemplify traits considered to be positive by the community while

⁶²Lithuanian Jews are known as the prototypical adherents of the rational, punctilious interpretation of Judaism that was an anathema to those of the Hasidic movement. There was, during the 17th and 18th centuries a deep rivalry between what came to be considered two camps—the Hasidic mystics and the rational traditionalists. This rivalry survives as a shadow of its former self, but still inspires laughter among Yiddish speaking Jews.

mostly non-Jewish figures demonstrate the foibles and negative features that are exposed to ridicule. The one indispensable plot line of every play is the final and deserved triumph of the Jewish community or character over a morally bankrupt or dangerous person or situation. Along with this, the plays invariably express the messianic hope of a parallel and ultimate redemption of the Jewish people in life. This belief and the spiritual communion that it engenders are the high point of every *purimshpil*. Importantly, God is always the agent of this reversal of fortune. In turn, the community offers praise and thanks.

The conversation exemplified by the *purimshpil* texts can be regarded as an offering to God. With the *tish* as altar and stage, the Bobover community offers an illustration of the fundamental relationship of their community to God as they see it. That is, a community of faith who believes that despite trials and difficulties, they are certain of their ultimate compensation by God. According to Tillis, folk theatre provides “an essentially unmediated image of . . . culture, that is, we see the culture as it is constructed in the minds of performers and audience.”⁶³

⁶³Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Theatre*, 146.

The *purimshpil* illuminates the basic spiritual worldview of the Bobover community and the opposite poles within which its members frame their own experience. To an outsider, this worldview, which acknowledges the tribulations of life and hopes palpably for eventual deliverance, may seem incongruous. After all, the Bobover group is comprised of Holocaust survivors and their children whose first play in 1948 was performed to a community of whom many had lost everything. However, this conversation has taken place every year around the Purim *tish* for the last fifty-three years. In the process, the community has taken up and become proficient in a set of theatrical practices, many of which it shares with legions of folk theatre compatriots around the world. As such, the Bobover are part of a historically and geographically diverse tradition of folk theatre. This heritage has enabled members of the community to symbolically perform their lives, as they perceive them to be. As such, the Bobover share the arena of the magic circle with other theatrical practitioners, making amateur theatre from substance of their own lives. We shall, in the next chapter, examine the theatrical practices that enable them to accomplish that task.

Chapter V: *Purimshpil* Performance Practices

How best to tell the story? Where to begin?
What in the master story speaks to one and
therefore makes one speak?

- Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg¹

The signifying practice of the Bobover *purimshpil* is the melding together of diverse and apparently contrasting elements to generate a coherent whole. Heterogeneity—both material and ideational—informs the lively folk performance of this Hasidic community. Ironically, the notion that drives the group's theatrical practices proposes that diverse and even opposing elements—sacred and profane, high and low, Jew and Gentile, exile and redemption—are related to and inform one another. The Bobover community has created a folk theatrical that provides its members an opportunity to examine and temporarily adopt ideas that

¹Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on the Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 5.

contrast with their normative practices in a manner that ultimately leads to community renewal.

This chapter investigates the salient performance practices used by the Bobover in mounting the *purimshpil* theatrical. In more than fifty years of preparing amateur dramatic presentations for their community, the group has become adept at employing a variety of staging techniques, eventually adopting a formula that suits their theatrical goals. The plays are highly stylized, using costumes, stage settings, props, masks, music, and a collection of other theatrical practices to present a conjectural (and fanciful) picture of Jewish life in the Diaspora. It would be impossible in one chapter to analyze every technique used in the staging of this complex folk performance. However, in the following pages, I will outline the most important theatrical conventions in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the ongoing theatrical tradition that has evolved in the Bobover community.

This analysis, moreover, argues that the techniques used in staging these amateur Purim theatricals are rooted in the reading practices of orthodox Judaism. In Bobover Hasidism, as in all ultra-orthodox Jewish society, piety, gained through knowledge and

application of the precepts of Torah, is considered the highest life achievement. The Hebrew Bible includes Torah, (the Five Books of Moses, or *Chumash*) and another series of books classified as the Prophets, (*Nevi'im*) and the Writings (*Ketuvim*). Ancient and medieval thought considers the origin of all thirty-nine books of the Bible as divine, with the Torah as directly revealed to Moses by God at Sinai.² In addition, Torah learning includes the corpus of biblical commentary referred to as the oral law or midrash (which has, itself become canonical in status and is also believed to be divinely inspired).³ Thus, Judaism refers to both the written and oral Torah, considering the first to be the actual words of God and the second to be biblical interpretation that is "revelatory in nature."⁴ This chapter will demonstrate that the melange of components comprising the Bobover *purimshpiln* are a reflection of the

²The *Book of Esther* is part of the Writings. See Joel Rosenberg, "Biblical Narrative," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Jewish Classics*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 31-82.

³For a concise history of the development of midrash and its relation to the biblical scriptures, see Lawrence H. Schiffman, "Mishnah: the New Scripture," in *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1991), 177-200.

⁴Elliot Wolfson, quoted in Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, 2.

abundant heterogeneity found in the Torah, which Jews study as the fundamental element of their spiritual work.

In ultra-orthodox communities, men who can afford to are likely to spend a lifetime studying these bodies of literature, as the mastery of these works (rather than, for example, financial station or physical qualifications) confirms status in the society of which they are a part. The Bobover educational system, along with numerous other communal, organizational, and familial frameworks, endeavors to make prolonged Torah study possible for any of its men that have the aptitude and inclination to engage in it.⁵

It is not the project of this chapter, however, to analyze the study of Torah. Instead, my intention is to illustrate the links between the modes by which Bobover Purim plays are staged and the way in which the learning of Torah takes place in communities such as that of the Bobover. My examination will demonstrate that both performance practices and reading practice reflect the same

⁵For an analysis the various stages of formal education in the Bobover community, see Robert Mark Kamen, *Growing Up Hasidic: Education and Socialization in the Bobover Hasidic Community* (New York: AMS Press, 1985).

underlying attitude to the respective worlds in which they function. Recalling folklorist Richard Dorson's assertion (quoted in Chapter IV) that folk expression is "an event in time in which a tradition is performed,"⁶ my analysis of *purimshpil* performance practices seeks to uncover the master tradition that animates Bobover theatrical practice. As Tillis asserts, "folk theatre forms, not being predicated on authority, tend to share significant traits with other forms of activity within their culture."⁷ The discerning spectator at the *purimshpil* will, it follows, see familiar characteristics from the more typical (indeed normative) Bobover activity of Torah study reflected in the performance.

My claim here is not the self-evident fact that Bobover plays tend to portray biblical and historical subjects and ultimately teach the values espoused in Torah. Rather, I believe that the performance practices under consideration, which bring unconscious or unspoken elements of experience to the stage and to the fore, reiterate a tradition well established by the relationship of

⁶Dorson characterizes folklorists of the 1960s who subscribe to this idea as the (then) emerging school of contextual folklore. This concept contributed substantially to the development of performance studies in the decades following. See Richard Dorson, "Introduction: Concepts of Folklore and Folklife Studies," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972), 45.
⁷Steve Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Drama* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 147.

the written to the oral Torah. Biblical scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg employs this mode in her recent book *The Particulars of Rapture*, which weaves into the biblical story of the exodus a wide range of midrashic commentary on it and other biblical texts. According to Zornberg,

the *peshat*, or plain meaning of the text, functions as the conscious layer of meaning; while the while the midrashic stories and exegeses intimate unconscious layers, encrypted traces of more complex meaning. The public, overt, triumphal narrative of redemption is therefore diffracted in the midrashic texts into multiple, contradictory, unofficial narratives, which, like the unconscious, undercut, destabilize the public narrative.⁸

Similarly, the *purimshpiln* interpret biblical or historical stories broadly, allowing space for the expression of some elements of folk culture that would be considered inappropriate in a more formalized setting such as the Sabbath morning prayers.

For example, the Bobover Jew may regard his life work as the drive to live according to the precepts of Torah. However, the gentile world, certainly in twenty-first century Brooklyn, is perforce

⁸Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, 3.

an undeniable part of his life experience. In fact, the non-Jewish milieu is the very arena from which the most zealous ultra-orthodox Jew works daily to separate himself.⁹ Ironically too, it is the Bobover view of the non-Jewish milieu that is so richly brought to life in *purimshpil* parodies. Conceptualizations of the Other that are brought onstage imitate and intimate gentile ways of life that are regarded as profane, lacking in decorum, or contrary to *Halakha* (Jewish law). At the same time, on the stage, these non-Jewish ideas provide opportunities for free association--to midrashic texts, to biblical stories, to Jewish history, to everyday life--and therefore constitute a dense semiotic field, which itself inspires rumination and interpretation.

⁹Michael Silber describes the emergence of ultra-orthodoxy in Judaism as a response to the crisis of modernity, faced first in Hungary in the mid-nineteenth century, where the dominant stream of Hungarian nationalists offered "full acceptance into Hungarian society provided that Jewish identity would be confined and redefined as strictly confessional." The positive response to this concept by an influential minority of Jewish community members hastened a crisis for traditionalists. Thus, a number of separatist ideas emerged in what came to be considered the ultra-orthodox camp. Among them was the 'Division of Labor,' according to which, "God created different types of men, each endowed with a different purpose in the scheme of creation. The vocation of non-Jews is to master nature, to explore science, and to invent useful technologies. The vocation of the Jew, on the other hand, is to devote himself solely to the study of Torah. Each to his own, and any attempt to rebel against one's assigned vocation and infringe upon another invited dire consequences." See Michael K. Silber, "The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy," in *The Uses of Tradition*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 23-84, quotations at 27 and 63, respectively.

The Bobover worldview, which stresses the separate but conjoined realms of sacred/profane, high/low, Jew/gentile, is expressed by many of the performance practices employed in the *purimshpil*. From the ground plan of the performing arena, to the choice of sets and costumes and the use of props and music, the *purimshpiln* bring together concepts that are thought to be opposites and, in other contexts, mutually exclusive. Numerous performance practices throughout the theatrical presentation are used to weave contradictory ideas into the fabric of the production. Bobover plays typically feature elements from various periods and styles. Sets, costumes, props, and music are a potpourri; they are seemingly chosen at random. The production design projects an overall sense of directorial *laissez-faire*. However, at work is an eclectic sensibility that derives from the relative relationship that is perceived to exist between every point and its counterpoint.

The production design generally accentuates the opposing spheres that are crucial to the performance. The foundational setting of the *tish*, the ingenious table/stage set up, is an example of the way in which this performance braids together dissimilar elements to create a coherent conceptual field. At the start of the

evening, the large tabletop is covered in sheets of white plastic. At the head of the table before the *rebe's* chair, the candles, *challah* (the bread traditionally eaten by Jews on the Sabbath), and full table setting prompt associations with Sabbath dinner. From the women's gallery above the action, the table/stage formation visually resembles a Sabbath table. From both the men and women's sections, the symbolic meal evokes associations with the weekly Sabbath repast at which the father presides. Sabbath is a sacred time in the Bobover calendar, and the start of the Purim *tish* replicates the holy ambiance of that special interlude.

Yet, after the singing and the symbolic meal, the tabletop is no longer used as table but rather, as stage. Once the meal is concluded and the remaining food (save a few bottles of wine) is cleared away, there is a change in both the tabletop's function and in the audience's perception of that physical structure.¹⁰ Inevitably, as characters from the fictional play walk across the platform, the

¹⁰At the beginning of this year's *purimshpil*, while the *rebe* was recognizing his Hasidim and the liquor (*mashke*) was being handed out, one of the Hasidim walked on the white tabletop to collect money from people around the table. I overheard a woman near me blurt out, "I hate when they walk on the table." I thought it was a revealing comment. Certainly, it reflected the momentary discomfort I felt at seeing someone walk on a structure that at that point in the performance resembled a Sabbath table.

white plastic covering is torn or falls off, becoming untidy and revealing the brown wood underneath.

Perceptually, the tabletop that first prompted associations with Sabbath sacredness and perhaps even with the holy altar, later becomes a profane object, an ordinary stage upon which all manner of characters tread. Thus, like Purim itself, the table/stage is both sacred and profane. In fact, the transition from table to stage is symbolic of the thematic movement from pole to pole, which is the *raison d'être* of the Purim tradition. Paradoxically, this seemingly schizophrenic move from an idea to its opposite can be viewed as the unified action of the holiday. Indeed, the Purim sensibility remains neither exclusively sacred nor profane; neither exalted nor lowly, but instead, emphasizes the progression from one realm to the other and thus, the inevitable linkage between the two.

Scenery within the makeshift proscenium space also makes evident this eclectic sensibility. The Purim plays in this study usually present two locations, each demonstrating a particular value. Biblical plays typically feature outdoor environments and royal courts, often in alternating sequence. These environments, so different from one another, are excellent settings for expressing the

contrasting values of the Bobover world. At the same time, these differing locations imbue the plays with a quirky and anachronistic sensibility that adds to the rough-hewn, put-together quality that is part of the charm of these folk plays.

In the biblical play *From Slavery to Freedom*, for example, the court represents the power of the gentile oppressors of the Israelites, while the desert symbolizes the strength of Jewish faith. In *The Wisdom of Solomon*, the values are reversed, with the court representing wisdom and the forest as the locus of deceit. The *Sacrifice of Isaac* presents a house, a desert, and a green field, wherein God-fearing Jews are each subject to varying degrees of temptation to stray from the law. Similarly, in the domestic play *A Match in Brod*, a poor synagogue is contrasted with a wealthy Jewish home. These surroundings are used to illustrate the values of noble poverty versus corrupting wealth that are supposedly inherent in each. Lastly, *After the Days*, the one (partially) contemporary play in my study takes place in the locales of a Jewish schoolroom, the United Nations, and a Jewish street. The first is presented as the closed, pure Hasidic environment, which is disrupted by the Other, the Cossacks who perpetrate a pogrom on the Jewish town. The

second is shown as a base from which world leaders use their power for evil. The third is offered as the milieu of the ordinary person of faith whose unassuming life work—following God's laws—makes manifest the coming of the messiah.

The division of the plays into separate scenic domains enables this community of amateur playmakers to construct, relatively easily, a dazzling set for each play. The most important visual components of production design are the painted backdrops and elaborate costumes. Every play has two or occasionally three substantial backdrops. Until about ten years ago, these were painted to order by a highly talented, though non-professional member of the community. During the past decade, however, the group has rented most scenery from a theatrical supply store. The scenic backgrounds, along with the colorful costumes that are also rented are impressive. The backdrops portray general, all-purpose environments such as deserts, palaces, woods, and homes. They are beautiful and striking, and compared with the provisional nature of many of the other design elements, seem extraordinary.

Painted on reams of canvas, the backdrops measure approximately twelve by twenty five feet, and thus cover the entire

back wall of the stage. They are usually supplemented with props and accessories deemed important to the plots. Some makeshift props are used, but often, a number of truly impressive items, such as a golden throne or other royal accoutrements, are rented, and invariably contribute considerably to the sensation of splendor created. The combination of imposing backdrops and lavishly costumed characters creates, for this non-theatre going audience, the element of the astonishing that Renaissance theorist Lodovico Castelvetro postulated as crucial to the drama.¹¹

Over the years, the company of volunteer theatrical practitioners has become highly proficient in coordinating the joint effort of the *purimshpil* production. Discussions with those responsible for various aspects of the performances make clear, however, that areas of know-how (and by this point expertise) are demarcated within the group. Heshy Brachfeld and Yitzchak Stralberg, two Bobover Hasidim who have been engaged in these efforts for almost two decades, coordinate scenery and costumes. Over the years, they have worked with many professional theatrical

¹¹Lodovico Castelvetro, "On Aristotle's Poetics," trans. by Charles Gattnig in Bernard F. Dukore, ed. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974), 144.

supply companies in New York, and at this point are able to find the appropriate costumes, props, backdrops, and settings for any proposed play. According to Mr. Stralberg, their task might begin in a discussion with the author:

He will say what the story is, what image he wants to give, what feeling he wants to give to the audience. Then we might talk to the director or the actors. The unique thing about how we work is that it is a group effort. An actor may suggest a prop that he feels comfortable using. Maybe the director will want a particular concept or particular lines. And the writer will then write it. On the other hand, maybe Heshy and I will come across a backdrop that we think would be excellent to use. We could suggest it and the whole play that year could be written around that scenery.¹²

The picture that emerges is of a group of people who are so comfortable working together that they can each improvise on their appointed tasks and work creatively, responding well to one another's input. Undoubtedly, this close working process that has evolved lends to the community feelings of solidarity created by the event.

The technical components of the biblical play *From Slavery to Freedom* are representative of the most prominent *purimshpil*

¹²Yitzchak Stralberg, telephone conversation with the author, 16 April 2001.

performance practices. This play's background scenery illustrates three locations: an opulent throne room at court, a desert, and a pastoral scene. The action opens at court, where the backdrop of the throne room depicts a huge and luxurious hall, with flowing drapes and tall, majestic columns. In front of the backdrop is a white balustrade that is flanked at either side with a tall column, topped with a green plant. In front of this railing, at the center of the stage, on an elevated platform stands an ornate golden throne, upholstered in red velvet. Leading from this platform down two steps into the center of the stage is the royal red carpet. On each side of the throne stands a statue of a golden lion.

Costumes complete the extravagant mise-en-scene. The Egyptian pharaoh arrives on stage dressed in robes modeled, ironically, after the sixteenth century English Henry VIII.¹³ He wears a knee-length tunic and stockings, topped with a long outer garment of blue satin. The royal robe is embroidered with gold stripes and lined with long lapels of fur. A wide, stiffened ruff completes the ensemble, making this supposedly Egyptian monarch a model of

¹³R. Turner Wilcox, *The Mode in Costume* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), 122.

European royal fashion. In a reference to the historical origin of the staged story (and following what is understood as ancient Egyptian style), Pharaoh wears a wig of long hair, under headgear resembling Queen Nefertiti's wide-topped hat. On the hat is the figure of an asp, the symbol of royal power.¹⁴ In the king's hand rests the golden scepter mentioned in the *Book of Esther*.¹⁵

The costumes of the supporting players at court are no less fantastic. Pharaoh's servants are dressed in Roman habit, replete with armor, kilts, red capes, and plumed helmets.¹⁶ In a reference to the historical milieu of the *Book of Esther*, the king's advisors wear what is understood to have been ancient Persian garb.¹⁷ Their blue gowns with long, flowing sleeves suggest dignitaries at court. The advisor's robes, decorated with glittering stars, recall the elaborate embroidery and applique work popular during the period from 550 B.C.E through the period of the Crusades.¹⁸ The celestial design also prompts associations with astrology, magic, and alchemy; arts

¹⁴Ibid., 2. See also Lynn Schnurberger, *Let There Be Clothes: 40,000 Years of Fashion* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1991), 45.

¹⁵Esther 4:11.

¹⁶Wilcox, *Mode*, 23.

¹⁷In the *Book of Esther*, King Ahasuerus' closest advisors were from Persia and Media. See Esther, 1:14.

¹⁸Wilcox, *Mode*, 24-27.

practiced by Jews as well as non-Jews from the Hellenistic age until the eighteenth century.¹⁹ The advisors wear wigs of shoulder length hair crowned with the golden wreaths of Roman emperors.²⁰ Each is fitted with a long, prosthetic nose hinting of the masks of the *commedia dell'arte* as depicted in the sketches of Jaques Callot.²¹

Against this lavish court environment, the next scene opens to reveal a backdrop depicting a sparse desert scene. Painted in shades of brown, the background portrays a large expanse of arid land dotted with rock formations and distant mountains. Cacti and prairie grass (though oddly, the vegetation of the western United States rather than that of the Middle East) are prominent motifs in the backdrop. In one corner of the canvas, there is an image of a stone hut with a doorway, alongside a log fence. A spare wheel of a covered carriage is also painted into the backdrop, again suggesting the early western United States. Two Hebrews stand before this

¹⁹There is also a well-established connection between a number of concepts in the art of alchemy and the theology of Kabbalah, including evidence of Kabbalists who practiced alchemy. See Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994).

²⁰Wilcox, *Mode*, 18-20.

²¹The resemblance of the noses of these characters to Callot's famous sketches of characters of the *commedia* is probably coincidental, but striking nonetheless. See for example, Pierre Louis Ducharte, *The Italian Comedy*, trans. Randolph T. Weaver (1929; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 57, 249, 291.

background, breaking stones with modern sledgehammers. On the ground, boulders and piles of rocks built of Styrofoam suggest material used by the Hebrew slaves in building the Egyptian pyramids. At one side of the stage, there is a pile of neatly stacked red bricks; on the other, a covered well, seemingly out of place in the desert environment.

The Hebrews in this scene are dressed simply in calf-length white tunics, covered with robes of multi-toned stripes, and kaffieyehs on their heads. Moses arrives, clad entirely in white, the color symbolizing purity and Sabbath in the Jewish tradition. His sleeves, collars, and belt are embroidered in gold and he too, wears a kaffieyeh. Later, when Moses' brother Aaron appears onstage, he is wearing a long, white tunic and a tall fur hat. In shape, Aaron's head covering resembles the tall headdress of the priestly class of the Hebrews, but is probably modeled after the *kolpak* or a *spodik*, a "high fur hat trimmed with plush," worn by Polish Jews in the eighteenth century.²² Aaron's costume evokes the majestic images

²²Alfred Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1967), 128.

of the days when the Temple stood in Jerusalem and the Jewish priesthood was extant.²³

Notwithstanding the attempt to costume the Hebrews as biblical desert dwellers or the Pharaoh as an English Renaissance king, modern black shoes and pants can sometimes be seen under a character's disguise, indexing Brooklyn during the late twentieth century. While the Bobover practitioners would not call this an instance of Brechtian theatrical practices, it is, in fact a Brechtian technique, the Bobover way of deliberately showing the means of production. In her analysis of the Bobover code of dress and grooming, Epstein asserts that male members of the community never wear sandals, which they consider the dress of the gentiles (*goyishe malbishim*).²⁴ While sandals might well be appropriate for the ancient Hebrew characters onstage,²⁵ for members of the Bobover group, exposing partially bare feet on stage would certainly

²³It is interesting to note the resemblance between Aaron's costume and the priestly costumes of actors in some performances of Scottish and York Rites of Freemasonry at the turn of the century in the United States. While not completely analogous, both the *purimshpiln* and the Freemasonry spectacles draw on biblical themes, are rooted in a tradition of amateur theatre, and have a number of other similar characteristics. See C. Lance Brockman, *Theatre of the Fraternity 1896-1928: Staging the Ritual Space of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Minneapolis: Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, 1996).

²⁴Epstein, "The Celebration of a Contemporary Purim in the Bobover Hasidic Community," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1979), 84.

²⁵Rubens, *Jewish Costume*, 8.

be a breach of decorum. The contemporary shoes that show from under a character's costume serve to indicate that even during Purim, community decorum is maintained. The shoes however, distract from the performance. In fact, they function similarly for this audience, as do the practices of *verfremdungseffekt* in performances that are more consciously Brechtian. Estranging the viewer from the very illusion created onstage,²⁶ the shoes remind spectators (at least, momentarily) of the real identity of the person wearing the costume. Brecht considered this principle, "that the actor appears onstage in a double role" (playing himself and the fictional character), important to his epic theatre, where the audience was to be repeatedly made aware of the means of production.²⁷ For Brecht, the *verfremdungseffekt* onstage serves to reveal the means of production in the society at large.

In the Bobover context, where both spectators and actors are part of an "in-group for their fellows" (Twycross' phrase), the same alienation affect assures spectators that they are participating in a communal affair and thus, reinforces the bonds created by the

²⁶Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre: 1948," in *Playwrights on Playwrighting*, ed. Toby Cole, trans. John Willett and edited by Eric Bentley (1961; reprint, New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 72-105.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

performance. Certainly, the community relationships that precede and follow the *purimshpiln* add to people's enjoyment of the theatrical event. According to Petr Bogatyrev,

despite the fact that an actor expresses regal dignity by his costume. . . we see in him not only a system of signs but a living person. That this is really the case is most easily seen when a spectator observes on the stage a person close to him--or herself, for example a mother watching her son perform the role of a king. . . This special artistic duplexity acquires great theatrical effect in the folk theatre where the audience knows the actors well.²⁸

In addition, it serves to reinforce the amateur aesthetic that the *purimshpiln* consciously preserve. Since this community views the making of theatre as a non-Jewish custom, the amateur aesthetic becomes a part of the ideology of the performance. Indeed, lack of theatrical expertise (though not talent) is extolled. The Bobover consider proficiency garnered by theatrical training as time better spent in the study of Torah.²⁹

²⁸Petr Bogatyrev, "Semiotics of the Folk Theatre," in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (1976; reprint, Cambridge: MIT, 1976), 33-56, quotation at 48.

²⁹For a picture of community opinions on the idea of study of secular subjects in the Bobover schools, see Kamen, "Appendix I," *Education and Socialization*, 109-123. For a discussion of the importance of study of Torah in Hasidic and Rabbinic Judaism, see Aaron Wertheim, "The Obligation to Study *Halakha*," in *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, trans. Shmuel Himelstein (Hoboken: Ktav, 1992), 64-68.

The third scenic background seems at first glance to be pastoral. When the curtain opens, Moses is sitting on a large rock, thinking out loud about how he will tend his flock of sheep. A number of boulders are scattered about. Behind one large rock, a little boy dressed in white, wearing the mask of a sheep, and crouching on all fours, peeks out at Moses and at the audience. A recorded sound of a sheep bleating is played as sound effect. The covered well from the previous desert scene is onstage, though in a different place than before. The water jug from the earlier scene rests near Moses' feet. There is a plastic bucket on the ledge of the well, quite out of place in the desert environment. The backdrop is painted in the same neutral beige and browns of the previous canvases and appears to be congruent with the earlier scenes. And yet, upon closer inspection—the process of selective inattention at work—the viewer may realize that the backdrop depicts a winter scene in what might be a European landscape. Mountains and leafless trees are prominent in the backdrop. In the distance, buildings are laden with snow and the steeple of a white church glistens in the snowy night.

This scenery appears to be anachronistic in a biblical play whose action takes place in Egypt. Indeed, it far more resembles the kinds of landscapes in Europe in which many of the community members were born and lived before the Holocaust. The scene goes on to depict the biblical events recounted in *the Book of Exodus*, in which God charges Moses with leading the Hebrews out of Egypt.³⁰ Set against the European backdrop, the picture is rife with meaning. The scene's references to the suffering of the Jews and the promised redemption by God appear to include not just those Jews of the immediate narrative, but the very Jews watching the performance—and by extension, all Jewish people in every period and in every land.

The melange of styles, which makes the play richly interesting visually, locates the action in a seemingly bygone, though non-specific, historical period and place. While the *Book of Exodus* putatively describes a historical event that took place in ancient Egypt, these sets and costumes introduce additional time periods to the play. Interestingly, the costumes used are inevitably modeled after the stock houses of European theatre. Therefore, while the

³⁰Ex 2:17, 3:2, 3:5, 3:7, 3:9, 3:11, 4:11-12, 4:13, 4:1-5.

play's dialogue locates the production within Egypt during biblical time, the scenery and costumes indicate periods and styles that would be recognizable to a reader/theatregoer as largely western European in origin. Ironically, the technique of flooding the stage with a variety of images from various milieus may actually narrow the educational focus of the play. Ultimately, this *purimshpil* expresses an important aspect of the Bobover worldview: that Jews in every period are different and separate from their non-Jewish counterparts. Be it the English Renaissance, the Roman Empire, ancient Persia, or twentieth century Europe, Jewish history, according to the teachings espoused in *From Slavery to Freedom*, is posited as different from and often in opposition to that of the other peoples of the world.

The disparity in dress styles is also reminiscent of costume practices in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Historical accuracy was then not a primary value. While some characters had historically precise outfits, most notably kings such as Henry VIII and Richard III, a majority of costumes in the

wardrobe were either contemporary or Roman.³¹ Royal English garb was expensive to acquire and costuming an entire ensemble in clothes of such splendor would have been prohibitive for the companies who provided the costumes.³² At the same time, some stock characters wore conventionalized outfits. Classical heroes were dressed in the habit à la romaine.³³ Villains were clothed in black (a color also used for the costuming of Satan in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*).

In the *purimshpil*, historical accuracy is not relevant. The costumes represent character types and the stage sets lend an exotic flavor to the various locations of the plays. In the case of *From Slavery to Freedom*, as in all the other Bobover plays, costumes are used to illustrate broad ideas about characters, rather than to place them in one specific period or milieu. *The Play of Solomon the King*, for example, uses a mix of costume styles. In this play, the king is dressed in the long, velvet robe of Richard III. The robe is crimson velvet lined with ermine.³⁴ A golden crown rests on

³¹Diana de Marly, *Costume on the Stage: 1600-1940* (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1982), 42.

³²Ibid., 45.

³³Ibid., 49.

³⁴For description and picture of King Richard III's costume, see Ibid., 45.

Solomon's head and a large golden medallion hangs from his neck. While the servants of Pharaoh in *From Slavery to Freedom* wore Roman habit, King Solomon's two attendants are dressed as present day guards at Buckingham Palace. The men, in red jackets and tall black hats flanking the monarch at either side of the throne resemble bookends. In this play, the two subjects of the king who come to plead before him are thin looking versions of the typical Falstaff. They wear bonnets with large plumes. Over their doublets, one wears a cape and the other, a jacket over breeches and boots.³⁵

The Bobover view put forth in the plays asserts that there is ultimately little difference in an Egyptian pharaoh, an English monarch, or a Saddam Hussein. In these plays, the non-Jewish attitude towards the Jewish communities in the Diaspora is always antithetical to Jewish well being. In *After the Days*, for example, the character of the messiah expresses exactly this sentiment when he scolds each of the world leaders who request to be redeemed along with the Jews. He says to the Polish president:

You big fool. How many Jews did you dress in sorrow? How much did the Jews suffer from you? A whole land filled with anti-semites. And when the Germans came into your land,

³⁵For a picture of the character of Falstaff, see *Ibid.*, 47.

what did you do? You gave it a hand. You told where all the Jews were hiding. You handed over the people with violence.³⁶

The president of Russia, Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein get similar lectures. In this way, the Bobover remind their own community members of their belief that Jew and gentile live according to opposing ideas. All the plays put forth the notion that in every time period, the salvation of Jewish people in a precarious world rests with their God, rather than with the representatives or ways of life of gentile culture.

Lighting practices are another mode by which the Bobover community asserts its worldview of the relative relationships that exist between opposing spheres. Every Bobover play takes place with an approximately uniform intensity of lighting in the house and stage. As in the theatre of the Italian Renaissance, where lighting in the hall was deliberately used to pay homage to honored guests,³⁷ the Bobover *rebe* must be seen during the performance. In every *purimshpil*, the lighting design consciously makes the *rebe* a

³⁶Abraham Knobloch, *M'Avdus LeCheirus* (From Slavery to Freedom). Full text of a video produced by Abraham Knobloch and directed by Moshe Aftergut. New York: Freedman's Photography, 1992.

³⁷Gosta M. Bergman, *Lighting in the Theatre* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 56.

consistent focus of attention. Unlike the modern theatre, in which the darkened auditorium routinely serves to focus audience attention on the illuminated stage and the illusion created therein, the *purimshpil* acquires its meaning in the context of the *rebe's* enjoyment of the event. The audience's split focus—made possible by the constant illumination of both the *rebe* and the actors—serves as a demonstration of the meaning of the theatrical activity onstage. Indeed the play is justified only by the fact of the presence of the *rebe*. In effect, the two contrasting poles of the performance—the holy *rebe* on his stage and the exotic actors on theirs—remain illuminated, thus foregrounded throughout the event. Therefore, the use of spot or foot lights is superfluous in the context of this performance.

On the other hand, other special lighting effects are employed in the *purimshpil* when deemed necessary. The Bobover, like their counterpart theatrical practitioners in the Middle Ages, often use lighting effects to allude to God and the supernatural.³⁸ In the play *From Slavery to Freedom*, strobe lights flash and the sound of thunder is heard every time God speaks to Moses. When Moses

³⁸*Ibid.*, 29.

beholds the burning bush, light and smoke (from a theatrical fog machine hidden behind the scenery) emanate from the shrub. Similarly, in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, a red light shines from within the altar after the young boy is placed on top of the pyre. In the same way, *The Play of Daniel* uses colored lighting to simulate the fiery furnace. In *The Play of Solomon the King*, four evil spirits costumed as skeletons (in garb that was apparently created for Halloween by a commercial concern) emerge from a trap door in the stage while lights flash to the sound of menacing music. In fact, the plays use special lighting effects that are likely to shift audience attention from the *rebe* only momentarily, and then, only when God or the supernatural are alluded to onstage. Even during the extended scene portraying the plague of darkness in *From Slavery to Freedom*, the house and stage lights were not dimmed and the entire cast mimed their sightlessness.

As in every theatrical, music lends mood to the performances. Beyond that, however, the wide range of musical styles used in Bobover *purimshpiln* attests to the group's political and religious views, their concept of memory, reliance on tradition, and their knowledge of other cultures. The Bobover plays are brimming with

music. The preponderance of music and sung numbers likens the *purimshpil* to operetta whose "construction may vary from a close resemblance to that of a full-blown opera to a close kinship to a play enhanced by songs."³⁹ Music is key to establishing the seesawing feelings that are deliberately engendered by the performance. While some scenes tend toward sentimentality and gaiety, they are readily undercut and destabilized by frequent mournful scenes.

The blending of styles, which is characteristic of Bobover scenery and costume practices, extends also to the way in which the group uses music. Every *purimshpil* uses a combination of live and recorded music. The two regular musicians are a keyboardist (on synthesizer) and a violinist. Both provide incidental accompaniment before the play begins and attendant music before and after the scenes. During the *purimshpil*, the musicians provide much of the emotional quality to the performance text, playing violin to accompany scenes of lamentation and synthesizer for those of levity. Moreover, there is a pool of music from which specific selections are chosen repeatedly—and in various combinations. Thus, each year it is possible for the group to put together a musical

³⁹Cambridge Guide to Theatre, s.v. "operetta."

score with relative speed, regardless of the specific play. The most important element, however, and clearly dear to the folk audience, are the live vocal performances given by group members of considerable natural born talent.

One would expect traditional tunes to be a part of an operetta of a devout group of celebrants. Many of the selections are, in fact, handed down, including melodious prayers, mournful lamentations, well known Hasidic tunes, and beautiful Yiddish folk songs.⁴⁰

Played by the violinist and sung by cast-members that have impressive vocal abilities, these selections create some of the most moving moments in the performances. In *The Play of Daniel*, for example, the violinist plays a familiar and mournful tune entitled “I Believe” (*Ani Ma'amin*) as the Jewish children are lead to the kiln. The song, about faith in the coming of the messiah, is a classic in the Jewish repertoire, a much-loved folk-song that is now forever connected to the fact that it was sung by Jews on their way to the Nazi gas chambers. It perfectly mirrors the didactic message of the Daniel scene, in which martyrdom is welcomed in the name of God.

⁴⁰Shifra Epstein provides a detailed description of the sources of music used in the *purimshpiln* as well as lyrics and musical notation for a number of the selections. See *The Daniel-Shpil in the Bobover Hasidic Community: Yiddish Texts and Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 64-69 and 141-180.

Often, a familiar melody having emotional appeal will be used with newly penned lyrics befitting the specific play. Prayers of supplication to God are sung unchanged and are included in all the plays appropriate to many, if not all, Bobover plots. In addition, Hasidic *nigunim* (melodies) composed by the father and grandfather of the *rebe*, are used in all of the plays, creating a deep sense of Hasidic and community connection to the material on stage.

The Bobover occasionally use popular Israeli and American music to achieve specific emotional and didactic ends. Often, the tunes are recorded or played on the synthesizer and are used to make comic or satirical points. These melodies completely contradict the baleful emotional quality in much of the Jewish liturgical music used, and thus provide a jarring and comic sensation. In *From Slavery to Freedom*, for example, when Pharaoh is thinking of a plan to kill all the Hebrews, the opening fanfare of a horse race is sounded. Similarly, when Ishmael first appears on stage in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, he immediately speaks the line, (in Hebrew) “I am Ishmael. I am an Arab.”⁴¹ At once, a recording of traditional Arabic music and drumming is played and the hefty

⁴¹Judaism determines lineage through the mother. Hence, Ishmael

actor does a comic belly dance. In *A Match in Brod*, traditional Jewish wedding music is played as a leitmotif throughout the performance and has a sentimental effect on this play about marriage.

At times, comic musical commentary can be politically caustic. The following partially sung dialogue in *From Slavery to Freedom*, is an example:

Pharaoh: (to his advisor) Ah the little Jews, beggars. They don't want to work. A whole country of beggars. William, do you know how to say beggar in Egyptian? It's called a (sings): LA..
Do you know what you call two beggars? (sings): LA, LA.
And a whole country of beggars? (Sings the first bar of the Israeli national anthem). LA, LA, LA, LA, LA. . .⁴²

This commentary applies not just to the Egyptian Pharaoh, but possibly, to the political views of this community of Jews who are ideologically anti-Zionist.

the son of Hagar the Egyptian, is an Arab.

⁴²Knobloch, *M'Avdus LeCheirus*, text video.

The leitmotif of the *purimshpil* is incongruity. Anachronism is embroidered by the performance practices into the very fabric of the production. Exile and redemption, the opposing thematic poles between which this Hasidic performance oscillates, are foregrounded by virtually every technique of production used to mount the show. The Purim story culminates in a reversal of fortune, in which the opposite of what was planned by Haman against the Jewish people comes to pass. As noted in chapter two, Purim tradition marks this biblical inversion of events by bringing various contradictions and turnabouts to the forefront of the congregant's awareness.

In the preceding pages, I have endeavored to describe the most prominent *purimshpil* performance practices in order to demonstrate how the teaching of Torah is transformed from a written heritage into a "tradition in time" (Dorson). The following section is a different kind of explication, one that attempts to recapitulate the tradition of biblical and midrashic exegesis that usually takes place at a desk, with multiple texts, with more than one student interpreting layers of meaning. I take as my study partner the text of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's exegesis of the exodus

story. Weaving together the scripture and the midrash that develops it, Zornberg demonstrates her mode of Torah study:

In my approach, the biblical text is not allowed to stand alone, but has its boundaries blurred by later commentaries and by a persistent intertextuality that makes it impossible to imagine that meaning is somehow transparently present in the isolated text. . . The blurring of boundaries between revelation and interpretation, between the written and the oral Torah, is a fundamental mode of the rabbinic imagination.⁴³

My intention is to use Zornberg's commentary to explicate one scene in the play *From Slavery to Freedom*. This theatrical analysis endeavors to reflect the mode by which she and other scholars use midrash to interpret the exodus story. My aim is to amplify—to fill in the gaps—of the theatrical performance with midrash. In so doing, we may come closer to understanding the way in which the *purimshpil* is received by a community for whom study of Torah (combined with the constantly interwoven analysis of its interpretation) is the primary mode of learning.

⁴³Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, 2.

In addition, I use Daniel Boyarin's book *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* to describe what the author refers to as "the unique Jewish discourse called midrash."⁴⁴ Boyarin demonstrates that reading practice in orthodox Judasim is a complex and multi-layered process of study, marked by the reading of texts in concert with--and in juxtaposition to--additional texts of interpretation. As mentioned in chapter two, biblical narrative cannot possibly record the entire history of a people in a linear fashion. Each narrative necessarily contains gaps. Beyond that, a normative intertextuality as well as intratextuality mark biblical narratives. The Bible persistently refers to itself and to other texts as an inextricable element of its own structure, simultaneously constructing and disrupting its own narrative. Boyarin asserts,

the heterogeneity--the multivocality of the biblical text itself, its hiatuses and gaps, creatively but not open-endedly filled in by the midrash--allows it to generate its meanings--its *original* meanings--in ever new social and cultural situations. It is by now practically a commonplace that the narrative of the Torah is characterized by an extraordinarily high degree of gapping, indeterminacy, repetition and self-contradiction.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1990), xi.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 39.

By understanding the way this system of study operates, we can also recognize the way in which meaning is created by the theatrical event that is the *purimshpil*. Boyarin characterizes the entire project of studying Torah as the foundational element of "a community in which interpretation [is] the central definitive act of religion and therefore of culture."⁴⁶

What happens, then, when yet another kind of text--that of performance--is added to the narrative? The play (and its interstices) becomes another layer of text that is available for interpretation. Thus, new meanings are infused into Torah study, adding to the semiotic meanings engendered by biblical interpretation of the written narrative. In addition, the inverse takes place: non-contiguous Torah study permeates the play, imbuing the performance text with new meanings. What I hope will emerge from the following discussion is a picture of the *purimshpil* as an extraordinarily dense and complex field of semiosis. This analysis will focus on only one prop used in one play--the live frog--in the 1992 staging of *From Slavery to Freedom*.

⁴⁶Ibid., 36

The entrance of frogs—on the table and into the play in the staging of this play—is an example of the convergence of textual and performative traditions. In the play, frogs used as dramatic personae in one short scene imbue the production with a fleeting sense of transcendent meaning. The videotape of the performance records a soaring and cathartic reaction from the audience in response to the frogs on stage. My attempt to locate the cause of the extraordinary reaction leads to an examination of some possible connotations of the frog in the *purimshpil*, and thus, to semiotics. Admittedly, a semiotic analysis of any of the Bobover plays as total artifacts would be so layered and complicated as to be virtually impossible. However, I consider here some of the possible meanings suggested by live frogs when used as props in this play. The exercise will make clear the extraordinary profundity and wide range of meanings produced by the performance as a whole. Additionally, the analysis endeavors to demonstrate the way midrash is intertwined in the staged theatrical, although it is not necessarily explicated onstage. Furthermore, I hope to show that the theatre event functions much the same way for the audience

that Torah study operates for the student, flooding the onstage narrative with extra-textual and extra-theatrical meanings.

The following is an analysis of one four-minute episode in the videotape of that production.⁴⁷ Within the short time span of the scene, live frogs that were released onto the stage caused a complete shift in the dynamics between characters on stage and between actors and audience members. Themes of obliteration of boundaries and the overthrowing of norms were evoked by the momentary bedlam that ensued when the frogs were used as props on the stage. The notions of overcoming established orders and hierarchies crucial to both the story of the Exodus and to the Jewish festival of Purim propelled the scene in question. The use of live frogs as props in this production is rife with significance, foregrounding strangeness, evoking taboo thoughts, calling to mind prohibited behaviors, recalling associations with the grotesque, and eliciting a cathartic release for at least some audience members. At the same time, all of these themes have been adumbrated in the midrash. Therefore, I will use a number of intertexts to rightly

⁴⁷An earlier version of the analysis of this scene was published as "On Smiting Borders and Staging Bedlam: The Live Frog as Prop in the Purim Play of the Bobover Hasidim," in *ASSAPH* C. 11 (1995): 64-74.

depict these supposedly strange elements introduced onto the stage as a reflection of Torah and its attendant midrashic commentary.

The use of hopping frogs on a stage where direct physical contact between audience members and fictional characters was possible encouraged a wild response from spectators. Close proximity of some of the viewers to these uncontrollable creatures heightened the general exhilaration. Audience reactions captured on the video reflected the types of irreverent behavior sanctioned for observant Jews during the festival of Purim. Used as props in the Bobover staging of the Exodus story, live jumping frogs made the potent image of the biblical plague of frogs palpable in twentieth century Brooklyn.

The frog scene in the video begins with Aaron relaying to Pharaoh God's threat to send a plague of frogs to the land of Egypt. Soon, a strange animal-like sound is heard in the distance. Pharaoh notices and inquires about it. Next, a large green plastic frog statuette with gaping mouth is brought on stage by one of the minor characters. Pharaoh comes forward, laughs derisively, and points at the thing. Live frogs begin to be observed in the mouth of the statuette as an actor on stage removes a few of the creatures and

throws them about the stage. Pharaoh picks up a frog, examines it and cries 'a frog', deliberately tossing it towards the table and thus towards the audience. Meanwhile, one of the king's advisors frantically follows the jumping frogs around the space. Pharaoh comments on the foolishness of sending frogs. Sitting exhaustedly on the throne after this burst of excitement, the monarch suddenly feels hungry and orders his servant Mahmud to get food. When the repast arrives, it is a loaf of *challah*. The sandwich is accompanied by a stuffed Kermit-the-frog toy, which Pharaoh flings to the side of the stage. While eating the meal, he supposedly bites into a live frog that had gotten into the bread. Hiding the frog in his costume, he manages to surreptitiously move it into his hand and place it near the *challah* just as he is presumably taking a bite. Miming revulsion, he ostensibly spits the frog out of his mouth, as he deftly tosses it onto the stage.

At this point, the spectators get visibly excited and the noise in the auditorium increases. Next we see Pharaoh in a state of agitation, finding a three-pound bullfrog under his royal headdress. He tosses the creature forward onto the table around which the audience sits. The children in the vicinity of the big frog begin to

murmur excitedly. The space is charged with emotion. The large bullfrog sitting on the tabletop is the object of intense fascination for the audience. Indeed, for the moment, the focus of the entire playlet is on the tabletop. A character from behind the proscenium arch crosses onto the table to catch the large bullfrog and put it back into the mouth of the plastic statue. He then deposits the figure and its contents unceremoniously on Pharaoh's throne. Meanwhile, the king enacts hysteria, repeatedly spitting the imaginary repulsive frog out of his mouth.

Later, during an extended scene in which Pharaoh burps, clutches his stomach and is apparently flatulent, the audience delights in recognizing that the frogs have infiltrated the very body of the ruler. When the king returns to his royal seat, he is aghast to find the frog statuette sitting there proudly, usurping his rightful place. At this time, little boys from the audience play excitedly with frogs at the edge of the table/stage. In their enthusiasm they begin shouting. Soon we hear a voice from offstage asking for quiet. One of the on stage characters removes the remaining frogs from the stage and gradually calm is restored. Pharaoh plops down on the

throne saying 'So, they sent us a bit of frogs.' Order is reestablished.

On stage the frogs had a far more commanding psychic affect on the audience than one would have expected, judging by stage time or their numbers *per se*. Technically, the amphibians occupied the action merely four minutes. There were probably no more than ten or twenty of the creatures in the performance. Indeed the 'plague' of frogs was only one of the ten plagues enacted or referred to in the playlet. Yet it was in a frog-filled moment both fleeting and significant that the performance rose to the level of the sublime. As the frogs jumped about on stage they caused a reaction of similarly wild abandon among the spectators closest to the stage. That moment was so emotionally charged, so temporally and spatially important that it would be difficult to imagine the same frogs in another environment—say, at the edge of a river—having a similar impact.

It is worth noting that the phenomenology of living beings on stage profoundly affects meanings in a play. As Bert States has eloquently elaborated in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, live animals on stage invite multiple readings. In his view, the very fact

of a living animal stepping into the space of the theatrical illusion elicits surprise from the audience. The live animal in the magic circle invites oscillating readings. Spectators can see both the workaday and the illusionary significance of the animal, although probably not at the same time. In States' view, "to the extent that something on stage arouses awareness of its external . . . significations, its internal. . . signification is reduced."⁴⁸ The extended appearance of live frogs on the Bobover stage clearly invited a familiar reading, particularly for the children.

The youngest spectators demonstrated enormous fascination with the animal as animal. They repeatedly attempted to touch and play with the frogs when proximity made this possible. While touching, admiring, and playing with the animals, the children were certainly not reading biblical or illusionary import into the frogs' presence on the stage. When the everyday significance of jumping frogs inserted itself into the fictive biblical play, a sense of strangeness pervaded. The individual audience members may not have been cognizant of the frogs simultaneously as biblical and back

⁴⁸Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 36.

yard critters. Yet, the realness of these green slimy frogs, leaping about in what was supposed to be a mimetic staging of a biblical story, engendered an unmistakable sense of duality and ambiguity.

A basic tenet of theatre semiotics asserts that an object on stage bears multiple meanings. As Keir Elam notes in the *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*,

It is an essential feature of the semiotic economy of theatrical performance that it employs a limited repertory of sign-vehicles in order to generate a potentially unlimited range of cultural units. . . This accounts for the polysemic character of the theatrical sign.⁴⁹

Let us consider a few of the significations of the frog in the scene above. Onstage in the Bobover Purim play, the live frog occupies a shifting and slippery position. On the one hand, the frogs are tossed about by actors and audience who, at least in the on stage moment, disregard their status as living beings. Regarded as passive

⁴⁹Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, (New York: Methuen, 1980), 11.

props, they are tossed around the stage almost as if they were inanimate objects.⁵⁰ Yet theatrically, in the four minutes the frogs are on stage, they manage to rise above the level of mere props, assuming the function of active characters.

Both live actors and inanimate objects are characterized by hierarchical relationships on stage.⁵¹ In his essay entitled “Signs in the Chinese Theatre,” Karel Brusak characterizes stage items in terms of function. At the top of the pyramid is the lead actor who, being the most dramatically active, captures the majority of the audience’s attention. After living characters, props that “participate in the player’s performance” are next in the hierarchy and so on, eventually arriving at the lowest point on the scale—articles which are used passively or those not actually used at all.⁵² In this play, the live frogs completely discombobulate the hapless Pharaoh, effectively removing him from his throne and momentarily capturing it for themselves. Theatrically they wrest attention and

⁵⁰The frogs are tossed about onto the stage, but the actors do not actually throw them with enough force to hurt them.

⁵¹Jindrich Honzl, “The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices,” in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, eds. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 118-127.

⁵²Karel Brusak, “Signs in the Chinese Theatre,” in *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Matejka, 59-73.

control of the stage from the lead actor and, while enjoying it themselves, engender the dramatic highlight of the play.

The bedlam on stage, which causes a shift of focus from the lead actor to the frogs, is a metaphor for the festival of Purim. In the play, frogs were originally brought onstage as props. However, they temporarily assumed the status of lead characters, giving rise to a sense of elation in the spectators. The audience members experienced a feeling of release when roles were reversed and they could laugh at the king being undone by the lowly amphibians. Similarly, the festival of Purim itself is a span of time in which rules are overturned and high is traded for low. This reversal creates the opportunity for community members to experience those feelings of freedom and cathartic release caused by temporarily letting go of their everyday rules and regulations. Once a year, as Talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin maintains,

Various 'low' cultural practices are explicitly prescribed in the *halakhic* literature or by custom. These include public drunkenness, treated by the Talmud as an obligation and the performance of plays that include cross dressing.⁵³

⁵³Daniel Boyarin, "Introduction: Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judaism: Theorizing Diaspora," *Poetics Today* 15.1 (Spring 1994): 3.

Certain established norms and hierarchies are set aside just long enough during the festival to give community members a sense that they are symbolically partaking in the Diaspora life which surrounds them.

Since the dispersion of the Hebrews from the biblical land of Israel, Jews have lived with gentiles as neighbors in their lands throughout the world. Nevertheless, those Jews who have continued to observe Jewish law scrupulously, as do the Bobover, have avoided assimilation and kept apart from the gentiles, even while living as guests in their countries. The Purim festival is a structure that enables observant Jews to symbolically and for a limited time throw off the strictures of their everyday lives by engaging in activities which they perceive as those of the non-Jew.⁵⁴ At the end of the festival of Purim, they return to their normative order.

Added to this layer of significance is the place that frogs occupy in the biblical narrative of the exodus. With the help of Zornberg and other commentators, I now turn to an exploration of the biblical text, in an attempt to uncover additional meanings generated in the play by biblical and midrashic textual analysis.

Behold I will smite all thy borders with frogs. And the river shall swarm with frogs, which shall go up and come into thy house and into thy bedchamber, and upon thy people, and into thine ovens, and into thy kneading troughs. And the frogs shall come up both upon thee, and upon thy people and upon all thy servants.⁵⁵

In the Bible, the plague of frogs serves to temporarily overrun ‘the borders,’ i.e. the country of Egypt, just as the Purim holiday temporarily overturns standard religious laws. The purpose of God’s amphibious assault against Pharaoh in the *Book of Exodus* was to overwhelm Egypt so that the Israelites could leave the land. In both the Bible and on the stage the havoc caused by the plague of frogs made way for a breakdown of the normative order.

The biblical verse which in English reads as ‘And the frogs shall come up both upon thee and upon thy people and upon all thy servants’⁵⁶ in the original Hebrew actually reads ‘And in thee, and in thy people and in all thy servants will arise the frogs’ (trans. mine).⁵⁷ Rashi, the medieval commentator interpreted the phrase to mean that the frogs literally found their way into the very bodies

⁵⁴Monford Harris, “Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order,” *Judaism* (1977 Vol. 26), 161-170.

⁵⁵Ex 7:27-29

⁵⁶Ex. 7:29.

⁵⁷‘U’becha u’beamecha u’bekol avdecha ya’alu hatzfardeim.’ Ex. 7:29.

of the Egyptians from within which they croaked.⁵⁸ In the *purimshpil*, the king expresses it vividly:

A whole night I couldn't sleep. All night, they were making noise and croaking. They were everywhere. I saw a green thing and it started to creep (cries). In my bedroom set, even in my pajamas. They were creeping in my bed. I wanted to have a tasty thing to eat. I took a bite of a *kichel* [cookie] and a frog sprang out. They are full on the floors and on the beds. They don't pay rent and you can't get them out. I had a little bit of soup. And then the frogs were swimming in my stomach (spits an imaginary frog out of his mouth). Every minute I have a heartburn. It's like the clinging of the change in the *pushkes* [charity collection boxes]. They are swimming around in there. In my stomach and in my intestines (burps, clutches his stomach. The two guards immediately use their big plummed fans to get the air near the king circulating).⁵⁹

Far from being mere theatrical hyperbole, Pharaoh's speech was created in accordance with the spirit of Rashi's midrash.

Jewish legend maintains that the soft frogs conquered the hard Egyptians by crawling through their marble buildings.⁶⁰ In the biblical story, the frogs are able to cover and obscure borders of buildings, bodies and even nations, causing bedlam and temporarily

⁵⁸A. Cohen, ed. and trans., *The Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth* (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 361f.

⁵⁹Knobloch, *From Slavery to Freedom*, video text.

⁶⁰H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds. and trans., *Exodus; Leviticus Vol. 2 of the Midrash Rabbah*. (London: Soncino Press, 1977), 133.

disrupting decorum. As part of the cumulative impact of the ten plagues, the abnormally numerous swarming frogs helped to facilitate the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. The grotesque aspect of the image of swarming frogs croaking from within the bodies of the Egyptians is developed, however, not in the bible, but in the midrash that amplifies it. The uninitiated may hear Pharaoh's monologue, with its references to bodily functions, as an example of scatological humor for its own sake. Most of the Bobover audience, however, hears the discursion with the ears of the Talmudist, and thus detects echoes of Rashi's elaboration of the biblical exodus narrative. Even those youngsters who are too young to have studied Rashi will make the connection when the time comes.

Along with the image of swarming frogs, the Bible recounts plagues of swarming locusts and swarming flies. The unnaturally prolific swarming of all types of creatures overwhelms the Egyptians of the narrative. In the *purimshpil*, the use of live, uncontrollable frogs is an effective theatrical tool because it makes instantly palpable the theme of aberrant multiplying that propels so many of the verses in the *Book of Exodus*. Furthermore, Zornberg

demonstrates that swarming; a recurring theme in *Exodus*, is even used in the midrash to characterize the Hebrew birthrate.⁶¹

And the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.⁶²

In juxtaposition to the swarming of frogs (and actually preceding the narrative of the ten plagues), the above depiction of the fecundity of the people of Israel sets the entire tone of the *Book of Exodus*. Zornberg characterizes this verse as "an almost surrealistic description of the spawning of a nation."⁶³

The swarming of the frogs against Pharaoh takes place, in fact, in contrast to the abnormally prolific reproduction of Hebrew babies. Zornberg affirms,

In the midrashic readings, there is a miraculous, even a whimsical sense of the outrageous victory of life over death: these, for instance take the six expressions of fertility (they were fruitful, they swarmed, they multiplied, they increased very, very much) to indicate that each woman gave birth to sextuplets (six to a belly). The affirmation of life contained in these pounding synonyms intimates, in its very excess, a transcendent order of meaning.⁶⁴

⁶¹Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, 18.

⁶²Ex. 1:7 (trans. Zornberg).

⁶³Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, 18.

⁶⁴Ibid., 19.

While Pharaoh attempts to kill off the Hebrew babes, God's plan simultaneously unfolds and undoes Pharaoh's plot. The Hebrews obey God's earlier edict to "be fruitful and multiply,"⁶⁵ despite Pharaoh's diametrically opposite decree requiring the drowning of all Hebrew babies in the river. That the Hebrew word *vayishretzu* (and they swarmed) is used to describe the way in which the Hebrew women reproduced provides Rashi with a rationale for the idea that each woman had sextuplets, which, according to Zornberg accords with the medieval notion that reptiles produce at least six offspring at a time.⁶⁶

In this short analysis, I have mentioned only a few of the numerous midrashic sources Zornberg brings to explicate the description in the *Book of Exodus* of the birth(ing) of the Hebrew nation. For the Bobover audience, these midrashic commentaries (and many others) are a part of the weave of the *purimshpil* as surely as they contribute to their normative Torah study.

⁶⁵Gen. 1:28.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 501f.

Furthermore, the idea of using live frogs on stage, which may or may not have been devised as a mere clever way to liven up the play, functions as a symbolic correlation with the notion of extraordinary fertility. This interpretation would be anticipated in a community that puts a prime value on procreation (and where families with eight or more children are not uncommon). In fact, one might even recognize in the picture of exceptional abundance a rueful answer to the Hitler, the modern day Pharaoh. In the Bobover view, that despot attempted to eliminate the Jewish people in nothing other than the contemporary version of the biblical decree that all Jewish babies be made to drown in the river.

In the Bobover Purim play, the frogs wreak havoc on their domain, the stage. Catalyst of bedlam and agent of change, the frog serves the same purpose as prop in the Purim play as it did playing God's factotum in the loathsome plague in the *Book of Exodus*. This small green creature diminished boundaries between spectators and performers, between stage space and audience sphere. Like magnets, the live animals attracted the audience's attention, thereby temporarily reordering the hierarchical relationships between characters and props on stage. They invaded Pharaoh's house and

usurped his throne. They made his own physical integrity meaningless as they got under his skin and lodged themselves within his body. Used as stage props, these unmistakably free agents caused a wild response from the spectators precisely because the creatures are uncontrollable. Had the stage really been inundated with frogs, as was Egypt during the plague, the performance would have ceased perforce. Similarly, had the present Bobover community not responded to Hitler's attempt to annihilate them with a determination to rebuild their own lives the Bobover legacy might have died out. Instead, Hasidic life, as reconstituted in the post-World War II period is exceptionally fruitful.

For Mikhail Bakhtin the transgressing of boundaries, particularly when there is also an incorporation of separate poles into one body, is an element of the grotesque.⁶⁷ The frog scene in this *purimshpil* is particularly revealing because it was during that scene, when associations with the grotesque were heightened, that the audience apparently experienced the most intense exhilaration.

⁶⁷Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1984), 308.

Returning momentarily to the image of a frog at the bank of a river, we find nothing strange nor even particularly funny in the picture; nothing that would summon forth deep laughter. Yet the scenario in which ungovernable frogs hop wildly around the court of Pharaoh was staged deliberately to induce the effect of uncontrollable levity, and it succeeded.

Moreover, a variety of images that may not have been consciously staged but arose nonetheless may have had the most profound effect on audience response. When Pharaoh throws the big bullfrog on to the table that abutts the stage, the table becomes a thrust stage and a focus of the drama. Yet just a short time before that very same space had suggested the Sabbath table and the *rebe's* meal. Clearly associations with purity of the Sabbath table are juxtaposed with feelings elicited by the sight of the slimy frog on the very same table. For ultra-orthodox Jews, religious observance is maintained by the separation between kinds of things: meat and milk, night and day, Jew and gentile, man and woman, sacred and profane. In her analysis of Jewish laws of purity in Leviticus, Mary

Douglas concludes that in Judaism “holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation.”⁶⁸

Yet the frog itself has a shifting position regarding the Jewish laws of purity outlined in Leviticus. This creature that both walks on land and swims in the water, is a liminal being—an animal not easily categorized. As living entities, frogs are considered acceptable and pure; yet when no longer alive, they are considered unclean and therefore not to be eaten. When Pharaoh finds a live frog in his *challah*, another symbol of Sabbath purity, the idea of eating non-kosher food might well arise.⁶⁹ Though repulsive, these associations brought forth the deepest laughter and glee from audience members.

Contrary to the normative Judaic view, for Bakhtin, the incorporation of opposite poles into one body is seen as profoundly positive, corresponding to the lived experience of ‘the folk.’ Judging by the squeals of delight and the receptivity of the spectators to the antics on stage, the use of live frogs as props was experienced as

⁶⁸Mary Douglas, “The Abominations in Leviticus” in *Purity and Danger* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1966), 53.

⁶⁹According to Samuel Heilman, a previous play of the Bobover Hasidim “mocked the apparently arcane Jewish dietary laws.” See Samuel C. Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 110.

deeply positive by the community members attending this performance. The sense of the grotesque that at times hovered over the action only added to the electric atmosphere of the performance. Precisely because of its strangeness, the grotesque is appropriate to the play and to the holiday of Purim. And, precisely because of its liminal status, the frog proved to be an evocative and useful prop in symbolizing the overturning of the normative order. In fact, for at least some audience members the experience of entertaining thoughts of what is otherwise considered exotic or taboo in Bover life was cathartic.

The Purim consciousness recognizes that every force contains within it the nucleus of its own counter force. For example, midrash maintains that after Mordecai's triumph over Haman, the hero acquired his foe's very position of wealth and power. Yet, his ascendancy was subject to a countervailing energy. Mordecai's rise in worldliness led to a corresponding decline in his spiritual life. His cosmopolitan position left him little time to study Torah; consequently, his standing as a scholar of Israel diminished.⁷⁰ This

⁷⁰Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 4:445.

tale beautifully encapsulates the tradition of Purim that the Bobover performance practices endeavor to illustrate. For just as Mordecai brought deliverance to the people of Israel when they were on the brink of annihilation, so Mordecai's own rise sowed the seeds of a possible future decline. Thus, the Purim tradition instructs Jews to mourn the low and celebrate the high while always remaining aware that the one is connected to the other. In the next chapter, I will examine another constellation of opposing forces: mourning/joy, exile/redemption, Egypt/Israel, here-now/the end of days to adumbrate the final destination in the tradition that the *purimshpil* enlivens.

**Chapter VI: After the Days/After the Plays
Memory and Meaning in the Purimshpil**

**Lord, why castest thou off my soul, why
hidest thou thy face from me?**

Psalms 88:14

**Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy cometh in the morning.**

Psalms 30:5

The Bobover *purimshpil* generates meaning in the symbolic (and psychic) space that is at the nexus of the rituals of mourning and celebration. Moving like a pendulum between these phenomenologically contrasting realms, theatrical representation is the given vehicle by which the observant Bobover community takes a roller coaster ride through the imaginary. The important destination, which, presumably, some spectators reach and to which others arrive only fleetingly or not at all, is connection and

reconnection to the ineffable. The transcendent God, with His promise of personal and collective redemption, is invoked by the *purimshpil*. Yet in this theatrical ritual, where movement between contradictory poles is constant, the numinous is elusive and can be evoked only in a transitory manner (if at all).

The *purimshpil* situates images that are parodic, transgressive, and arguably profane alongside depictions of fervent piety and Jewish martyrdom. However, none of these representations, in and of themselves, purport to be images of the essence of God. Judaism, as is widely known, prohibits the making of graven images.¹ Therefore, Jewish orthodoxy resists theatrical representation and would surely prohibit any professed representations of God on a theatrical stage. At the same time, Bobover *purimshpil* scripts clearly allude to the ineffable; the Purim *tish* as a whole is considered by believers to be a holy experience. While the Bobover stage is not used as the site for production of images of the Deity, representation performs an important part in invoking the Almighty.

¹Ex. 20:2-4, Dt. 5:8-9.

Mystical theology has contributed to the distinct nature of Hasidic Purim customs and directly affects the role of representation on the Bobover stage. Hasidim subscribe to the Kabbalistic view of Purim first articulated by the Jewish mystics of the sixteenth century. In their view, the joyous holiday of Purim is symbolically linked with the solemn Day of Atonement, Yom HaKippurim (also known as Yom Kippur).² In Hasidism, earnest observance of these two contrasting days—Purim, when the profane prevails, and Kippurim, when the sacred predominates—can combine to effect expiation. In fact, some Hasidim believe that the spirit of inversion allows even greater repentance to be manifested on Purim than on Kippurim. For this reason, Purim in Hasidism is of major importance—a providential time of devotion, despite its minor status in the formal Jewish law.³

²In Hebrew the word *Kippurim*, which means 'atonement' can also be translated as 'like Purim.'

³The Day of Atonement, considered in *Halakha* (along with the Sabbath) to be the holiest of days, is observed by acts regarded as pure, such as fasting, prayer and repentance. Purim, considered in the formal Jewish law to be a minor holiday, is observed by the indulgences of numerous feasts and the imbibing of much liquor. According to Wertheim, "Yom Kippur was instituted as the atonement for the golden calf, where they had eaten and drunk improperly, and that is why it is fitting that all should fast. On Purim, on the other hand, the deliverance came from the fact that they had fasted, and that is why one atones by eating." Aaron Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, trans. Shmuel Himelstein (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing, 1992), 290. For an explanation of a number of elements of Hasidic theology and their relation to Bobover Purim customs, see Shifra Epstein,

This mystical interpretation of Purim and Kippurim is but one of numerous aspects of Hasidic theology that locates meaning in presumably veiled phenomena.⁴ It is understandable that the *Book of Esther* which, according to biblical scholar Jon Levinson, “makes most of its points by indirection,”⁵ would be regarded by Hasidim as a text rife with enigmatic signification. In fact, the *purimshpiln* mirror the basic theological ideas gleaned by Hasidism from the *Book of Esther*.

The absence of the name of God in the *Scroll of Esther* has convinced some modern scholars that the book is secular. Most religious commentators from the Talmudic era to the present day, however, have maintained that God’s absence from *Esther* is an example of divine hiding.⁶ (The allusive name Esther comes from the Hebrew word *hester* or hiding). The *purimshpiln* allude to God

“The ‘Drinking Banquet’ (Trink-Siyde): A Hasidic Event for Purim,” *Poetics Today* 15.1 (Spring 1994): 134-136.

⁴Central to Hasidic theology is the Kabbalistic doctrine of the *Ein-Sof*, (the Without-End), which asserts that there is a (hidden) aspect of God that is utterly transcendent and beyond human apprehension. See Lawrence Fine, “Kabbalistic Texts,” in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 305-359.

⁵Jon D. Levinson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 12.

⁶For a survey of the views of prominent scholars on the subject of hiding in the *Book of Esther*, see Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1991), 235-247. See also Timothy K.

throughout; invariably they invoke the coming of the messiah during the denouement, thereby advancing this latter interpretation. While God is never shown on stage, it is clear that He is behind the scenes, as it were, ultimately directing the action. Indeed, the events of greatest importance are not the narratives shown on stage, but those greater stories in the real lives of the entire community of spectators.

The hoped for redemption that is invoked by every *purimshpil* narrative is regarded as promised by God to spectators, actors, their *rebe*, and by extension, to all Hasidim and to every Jewish person. The Purim *tish*, as well as the play (and the playing) which it occasions, function as a reiteration of the desire of every believer to be redeemed. Against the backdrop of the mundane world with its tribulations, this messianic aspiration, represented by actors and stories on a Purim stage (and in the presence of the *rebe*) can bring about an acute awareness of God's (yet unfulfilled) promise. This perception functions alongside the messianic belief that God may cause the redemption at any moment. I believe this is the metaphorical territory of the sacred real depicted in the

Beale, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York:

purimshpiln; and redemption, the answer to the question figuratively posed by each play. Furthermore, redemption is experienced by Hasidic believers as a real, and in fact imminent, possibility of life in the here and now.

In his elucidation of Kant's aesthetics of the sublime, Jean-François Lyotard asserts that "optical pleasure, when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity."⁷ Kant himself cited the biblical prohibition of images as an important example of this principle, which he called 'negative presentation.' For Kant, Lyotard asserts, the aesthetics of the sublime is born of a cleavage between what the mind can conceptualize and what the imagination can represent. The breach produces the sublime: "a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain."⁸

In the *purimshpiln*, ironically, that which produces meaning is not the representation of God (or of anything sacred) on stage. Rather, the plays invoke the indeterminate presence to the mind of the believer/spectator, an operation that results in a heightened awareness of the rift between the promised atonement and the

Routledge, 1997), 116-117.

⁷Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 250.

⁸*Ibid.*

mundane reality of life. This process, in turn, stimulates a profound experience of connection with the ineffable. Thus, it is not that which is represented, but the veiled reflection of that representation, which imparts to the *purimshpil* its enormous vitality.

Obviously, an indeterminate phenomenon such as God or the essence of meaning is (at least partially) hidden in a believer's consciousness. In *Unmarked*, an analysis of the relation of the real to the representational, author Peggy Phelan has demonstrated that the signifier of any purported real meaning exists in a realm that is phenomenologically different from the supposed essence of that meaning. Without a directly corresponding logic between the terms of representation and those of the real, the signifier in the representational frame always fails to convey meaning in absolute terms.⁹ Thus every image necessarily produces both excesses and gaps in signification.¹⁰

Just as virtually any text may be interpreted in more than one way due to an excess of signification, a text also inevitably contains

⁹Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

within its fissures, unspoken and unseen, but none-the-less acting upon the representational realm. These are the lacunae that Phelan refers to as the unmarked. Phelan argues furthermore, that “each representation relies on and reproduces a specific logic of the real; this logical real promotes its own representation.”¹¹ At the same time, representation cannot permanently deny meaning.¹² By carefully examining the logic of the real, which is produced by and for each system of representation, an observer can glean information about the unmarked forces contained therein.

In the *purimshpiln*, invisible constituents of representation reveal important assumptions contained in the logic of the symbolical sphere. In these texts, which are based on a God who remains hidden until after the play is over, that logic is rife with significance. As in every other discursive scheme, ultimate meaning in the Purim plays depends on a paradigm of representation that is generated to promote a belief that preceded the images given. Thus, the concept of the real, driving representation in these plays

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 180.

(as in other discourses), contains within it, as Phelan asserts, “a meta-text of exclusionary power.”¹³

The representational logic of the *purimshpil* relies heavily on demonstrating those things that are characteristic of the Other. In fact, images of the Other in the *purimshpiln* enable the community to partake symbolically of those elements that are considered outside the bounds of normative Hasidic life. In so doing, the *purimshpil* texts engender in the participants both elation and loss. The former is a result of the validation of a sense of identity which, as Phelan notes, is sought and mirrored within the representational frame.¹⁴ The latter is a consequence of remembering (again) that God remains hidden from the believer (still) and that the day, like the play, is not over (yet).¹⁵

Typically, in the Purim plays, things considered transgressive, such as some non-Jewish customs, are represented parodically, thereby invoking levity. Conversely, redemption, which is necessarily presented as the (not yet reified) alternative to Jewish

¹³Ibid., 3.

¹⁴Ibid., 5.

¹⁵In Hebrew, the phrase “after the days” (which is the title of the 1991 Bobover *purimshpil*) has a messianic connotation corresponding to the English expression “the end of days.”

historical experience, is presented mournfully, inducing a sense of loss. In this scheme, redemption functions as the logical and psychological Other to Jewish suffering throughout the long history of exile. Therefore, like the psychologically satisfying story of Purim, in which the Jewish people overturn their fate and prevail against their foes, the *purimshpiln* operate to express the believer/spectator's psychic wish to be spared the figurative fate of the Jewish characters represented on stage.

Purim customs bring the notion of the Other into the representational domain in order, ultimately, to validate the Hasidic celebrant's identity. Parody is used in the *purimshpiln* to represent that which the Hasid is not (or attempts to refrain from becoming). Along the way, the plays make claims about both the Hasidic and non-Hasidic ways of life. Parody is a highly self-referential genre, but at the same time, one that employs multiple texts to make its argument. In the view of Linda Hutcheon, author of *A Theory of Parody*, an examination of that genre in modern art, "parody is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion."¹⁶

¹⁶Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 6.

The reader or viewer must be familiar with both texts in use in a given representation to fully comprehend its dual meaning. As such, parody depends on a degree of cultural sophistication in the spectator/viewer who must read one or more texts against another.¹⁷

According to Peggy Phelan, imitation creates a sense of self, a base from which a speaker can meet the world. Therefore, in her view, the very notion of mimesis implies relationship with the Other:

Mimetic correspondence has a psychic appeal because one seeks a self-image within the representational frame. Mimetic representation requires that the writer/speaker employs pronouns, invents characters, records conversations, examines the words and images of others, so that the spectator can secure a coherent belief in self-authority, assurance, presence.¹⁸

Phelan asserts, moreover, that “the relationship between the real and the representational . . . is a version of the relation between self and other.”¹⁹ Therefore, the Other, as depicted by a speaker/author, also reveals important information about the ways in which the speaker/author views him/herself. Accordingly, in

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸Phelan, *Unmarked*, 5.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

their (often) parodic depictions of members of Other cultures, the Bobover theatrical practitioners also paint a portrait of their own community. Discourses about Jewish and non-Jewish laws, culture, and people share the Bobover stage. Linda Hutcheon speaks of twentieth century parody as “inter-art discourse.”²⁰ Similarly, every *purimshpil* is an inter-culture discourse, relying on spectators’ knowledge and personal views of the other culture/s to enable them to appreciate the ironic inversions presented on stage. In these images, those representations considered non-Hasidic are the more frequent (although not the only) objects of parody.

The 1989 *Play of Daniel* provides one example of the way in which the Other cultures are represented on the Bobover stage. Usually, the script assigns the Jewish characters positive traits; they are good, wise, god-fearing and righteous. On the other hand, non-Jewish biblical personae are characterized as negative—stupid, rapacious, and impure. Shifra Epstein correctly points out that these dichotomies function to teach a moral lesson about the way in which Bobover members must live in order to obey God and bring

²⁰Hutcheon, *Parody*, 2.

the redemption.²¹ Yet there remains another category of figures in this play—that of contemporary American individuals. While the fictional action takes place in ancient Babylon, the king’s three advisors dress, behave, and speak like present-day New Yorkers, possibly even people who live in proximity to the Bobover community. In my view, the characterizations of these figures reveal the contradictory nature of the authorial (and perhaps the community’s) estimation of the people depicted.

The script identifies Leroy Schwartzman (the minister of finance) as African American. Boris (the minister of transportation) is a Russian immigrant who is likely Jewish. Stargazer (the king’s seer) is not given an ethnic identity but could be read as either Jewish (though not Hasidic) or gentile. These figures are parodies of the Other Americans. The portrayals of Schwartzman and Boris might well cause ire among members of their respective ethnic groups (were any of their members ever to see these plays).²² In

²¹Shifra Epstein, “The Daniel-Shpil in the Bobover Hasidic Community” in *Yiddish Texts and Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 58-59.

²²It should be noted that Schwartz-man is the Yiddish term for black-man, and the term can be read and said as a negative colloquialism in Yiddish, an issue noted by Epstein. See *Ibid.* Boris, the common Russian first name, can be read as a negative signifier for all Russians. On names in the drama, see Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. John Halliday (1977; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991), 161.

describing the character of Schwartzman, for example, Epstein speculates that the portrayal may be, on some level, an expression of antipathy (her word is "tension") of Bobover members toward the African Americans who live in or near their neighborhoods. Leroy Schwartzman is

built around some stereotypes that exist in the American culture, which are held among the Bobover Hasidim . . . He wears black trousers, a black T-Shirt on which is printed a huge dollar sign. . . Resting on his shoulder is a big boom box out of which, at times, loud music blares. He wears a black wig on his head, full of curls in the Afro style and he is wearing black sunglasses. He is robust, constantly drinking from a bottle of whiskey and is portrayed as stupid and criminal.²³

In Epstein's post-performance interviews with the writer, director, and audience members, all respondents denied that the characterization of Schwartzman was intended to deride African-Americans.²⁴ Yet clearly, the author is poking fun at this character.

Through his speeches, Boris is conceived as a hapless Russian immigrant: a taxi driver, who cannot speak the language, has a thick accent and is certainly a poor driver. The following utterance is, for

²³Epstein, *Texts*, 59.

²⁴Ibid.

this audience of Borough Park residents, an obvious spoof of the livery cab industry in the area where many of the drivers are Russian immigrants.

When the king rides, he rides only in my car service . . .
 He rides all over. He rides gospital, Manhattan, Motor Vehicle,
 Airport . . . Manhattan, the auto transfer bureau. . . .
 I? Had an Accident? N'yet, N'yet. Other guy had an accident.
 Me? N'yet.²⁵

Again, Boris, in my view, is the punch line of a recurring joke about the Russian Jewish community in the Bobover milieu.

Stargazer is characterized as an eccentric who insinuated himself into a job as Nebuchadnezzar's clairvoyant by exercising his nimble skills at double-talk. The following speech is representative of Stargazer's ability at interpreting dreams:

I see a dream in a star, with a king. I see a dream. I see a star.
 And I see a dream with a star. I see a star. And I see a dream
 with a star. Seven fat cows. No, no, it is an old dream.²⁶

²⁵Epstein, "Daniel-Shpil," in *Texts*, 89.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 118.

With this introduction, Stargazer launches into a two-page monologue in response to Nebuchadnezzar's demand that the advisors divine the king's dream. Though *The Play of Daniel* is a dramatization of chapters 1-4 of the biblical *Book of Daniel*, Stargazer alludes to dreams of Pharaoh and his cupbearer in *The Book of Genesis*.²⁷ The confusion turns out to be a digression into Stargazer's own fantasies, a stream of consciousness diversion, which ends with the seer's hope of eventually attaining the king's wealth and power. In this example from his dream interpretation, Stargazer's underlying motives become clear only at the peroration's end:

According to my opinion, the dream goes like this: There was a miracle in a desert, a desolate, desolate desert. One could not see any created thing in the desert, only sand for miles and miles. The King Nebuchadnezzar, the greatest king in the world, went for a stroll with me, the cleverest advisor, the stargazer. . .²⁸

Later in the dream Stargazer saves Nebuchadnezzar from a four-headed snake, and then says:

²⁷Gen. 40-41.

²⁸Epstein" Daniel-Shpil," in *Texts*, 119.

"If the king wants," I said, "for every head of the snake, he should give me for the first head--a summer house--for the other three heads--palaces, one more beautiful than the other." And so passed a few years. The king became old and weak (sings) *barabim-bam* and I the advisor, the cleverest one of all was the king for the king. And so that was the dream!²⁹

Surely a kingdom ruled according to the prophecies of this morally bankrupt and ridiculous charlatan can only be rotten through and through, as was the sovereignty of Pharaoh in Egypt. In fact, Daniel, who is portrayed as pure (and a follower of the true God), subsequently prays to God and is thus able to properly interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The Bobover audience members may see in the figure of Stargazer any one of a number of Others who live in their domain and subscribe to the laws of a religion or lifestyle that they know to be false. On the other hand, this character may simply be a colorfully imagined magician who, like many other diviners in the Bible, proves to be focused on a spurious star.

Though the characterizations of these advisors are stereotypical and (on some levels) negative, in my opinion, the script does not view them as malevolent or despicable. In fact, it could be argued that the author feels affection for these figures,

²⁹Ibid.

whereas King Nebuchadnezzar and his servant inspire only authorial contempt. In my reading, the script renders Schwartzman, Boris, and Stargazer as outlandish and ludicrous, while simultaneously expressing admiration for their street smarts. They are depicted as using considerable and admirable tactical skill to become advisors to the king.

Theorist Manfred Pfister asserts that “a dramatic figure may be defined positively as the sum of the structural functions it fulfills.”³⁰ These characters certainly contribute much to the play in terms of structure. They provide the humorous tone and much of the wit in the performance. They function to create levity rather than to induce scorn. They are more likable than other characters that are presented as evil. These figures of the Others contain both negative and positive attributes, and are received in more than one way by audiences.

In another example, the play *After the Days* (1991) parodies the international political circumstances that lead up to the Gulf War. That *purimshpil* features the figures of Saddam Hussein, Fidel Castro, Mikhail Gorbachev and other (then) contemporary world

³⁰Pfister, *Analysis*, 163.

leaders. Seated around a conference table at the United Nations, they plan strategy for the war. The dialogue mercilessly lampoons current events and government officials. Saddam Hussein takes telephone calls from—and comments on—Jordan’s King Hussein, President George Bush the elder, Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and others. The scene mocks all the major international officials involved in the war, including Saddam Hussein, Israel’s Yitzchak Shamir, Mikhail Gorbachev, President Bush, and Jordan’s King Hussein. Many of the characters are depicted as wildly anti-Semitic.

The irreverent tone is sometimes even directed gently inward, toward the Bobover community and family as well. In one example, Saddam Hussein declares that the war against Israel and the United States would not only be “*de mama fun alleh milchoomehs* (the mother of all wars),” it was to be “*de shviger fun alleh milchoomehs* (the mother-in-law of all wars).”³¹ Amid the frivolity inspired by parody are other speeches, more serious in tone. In one such monologue Saddam Hussein proclaims:

³¹*After the Days*, full text of video produced by Abraham Knobloch and directed by Moshe Aftergut (New York: Friedman’s Photography), 1991.

I am the king of just Iraq? What about Kuwait? What about the others? What about Syria? What about Saudi Arabia? Until I get—until I have all these countries with me—Yes. With the strength of a lion, we will go in and usurp these lands. Who'll stand against? America? What kind of America? America is a paper tiger. . .³²

Speeches such as this one established moments of seriousness in the midst of the otherwise high spirits.

In the case of the *After the Days*, the plot required spectators to be conversant with Hasidic theology to fully appreciate the irony of the play's episodes. All scenes in this play lead to the coming of the messiah and the promised redemption. When the savior appeared, he confronted the formerly powerful leaders asking them why they had treated the Jews badly. The leaders profusely protested his assessment of their conduct and begged to be delivered along with the Jews. The messiah agreed, providing they could complete the simple task of building a booth for the holiday of *Sukkoth*, the Feast of Tabernacles. The viewers, familiar with Jewish law, were amused by the farcical, yet unrealizable attempts of the fictional leaders to do so. For of course, these world leaders

³²ibid.

had no knowledge of the *Halakhic* requirements for building such a structure.

This humorous scene likely engenders feelings of elation in the viewers. Surely, for them, levity is inspired by the reversal in which gentiles—in order to save their necks—must follow the laws of the seemingly obscure Jewish religion. At the same time, this scene also functions as a reminder to the Bobover members that the community (for the time being) lives according to the rules of a dominant culture, which to them is the Other. This painful reality has been the existential dilemma of Jews living in the Diaspora for most of Jewish history. Moreover, Hasidism instructs believers that the messiah will bring redemption and with it, release from this plight. The *purimshpil*, which may bring them the fleeting sense of connection with the transcendent, cannot but help to return the faithful to cognizance of the mundane world with its attendant afflictions and sense of loss.

Parody, is, in the formulation of Hutcheon, “a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance.”³³

Similarly, every Bobover spectator who is fluent in both Hasidic and

³³Hutcheon, *Parody*, 20.

New York urban culture is poised in the position of ideal spectator vis-a-vis the elements of parody in these performances. Such a viewer, fully appreciating the extent of a parodic image's distance from normative Hasidic culture, can receive its implied critique of the other culture from a coherent position of self-identification and authority. At the same time, marking that distance simultaneously consolidates sameness, since it posits the Hasid's own culture as existing in opposition to the (familiar) Other culture on stage. Rather than having to avoid these images of difference all together, parody provides a method for partaking of representations that might otherwise be denied. In other words, critical distance creates a form of transgression that is safe, therefore, authorized.³⁴

While parody in the *purimshpil* clearly functions as a method for engaging obliquely some images that would otherwise be considered transgressive, the event presents certain images in forthright seriousness. When staging representations of Jewish martyrdom and struggle, for example, the mood effected is reverent and solemn. These images are received as familiar and authentic expressions of Jewish experience. Epstein accurately refers to the

³⁴Ibid., 26.

Bobover *purimshpil* as “a literature of martyrdom,”³⁵ and one that performs a psychodramatic function.³⁶ The plays invariably show Jewish characters in a direct struggle against a dominant, anti-Semitic culture.

After the Days includes a scene depicting a Cossack pogrom against a classroom of Jewish students in early twentieth century Russia. In the *Play of Daniel*, Nebuchadnezzar demands that the Jewish boys either abandon faith or be thrown into a fiery furnace. In choosing the latter, the boys exemplify the Jewish principle of *Kiddush HaShem* (sanctification of the Divine Name), one of the highest ideals in Judaism, and one that has been closely associated with Hasidism.³⁷

For this community of Holocaust survivors, the theme of martyrdom resonates powerfully as a response to the deaths of family and community members at the hands of the Nazis. The *purimshpil* is a community event that commemorates the Jewish

³⁵Epstein, *Celebration*, 217.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 207.

³⁷“Sanctification of the Name” is the principle of being prepared to die rather than abandon faith. See Hyam Maccoby, “Sanctification of the Name,” in *Contemporary Jewish Thought*, edited by Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (1972; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1987), 849-54. For a discussion of the way in which this principle is exemplified by the Bobover play *Daniel in the Fiery Furnace*, See, Epstein, *Texts*, 63.

people's escape from extermination and is performed for and by a community who escaped such an extermination in their (or their immediate relatives') lifetimes. On a personal level, therefore, plays handling subjects of martyrdom and survival may function directly, for at least some spectators, as psychodramas. These plays offer spectators and the community as a whole the experience of witnessing characters functioning in predicaments that parallel those they actually survived in their immediate pasts.

The Holocaust is important to the reception of the *purimshpiln* although the event itself is not put forth as a direct subject of the Bobover theatrical representations. Ironically, the fact that the *rebe* prohibited direct reference to the Nazi genocide after the first American production did not prevent (nor was it meant to prevent) the Holocaust from appearing as a palpable presence in the Bobover plays thereafter. Deliberate, though indirect references to the Holocaust are regularly employed in the *purimshpiln*. One example would be the use of songs sung by Jews in the Nazi concentration camps as accompaniment to scenes of Jewish martyrdom in the *purimshpiln*.³⁸ This type of indirect

³⁸*Ibid.*

reference has the effect of inserting the Holocaust into representations on stage in an oblique manner. References such as this create (in a metaphoric sense) a phantom Holocaust presence that ghosts *purimshpil* representations.

The indirect manner in which much information in the *Book of Esther* is disseminated may in fact result in the community's heightened receptivity to unmarked hauntings in the *purimshpiln*. The phantasms which are a feature of every play are a response to (and the only solution for) the problem of incommensurability of Holocaust representations. As noted by Freddie Rokem in *Performing History*, his recent book about theatrical representations of historical events, those who attempt to stage images of the Holocaust find they first have to establish "a means to address and confront the incomprehensibility and incommunicability of the *Shoah* [Holocaust]." ³⁹ Rokem maintains that the event "can never be brought onto the theatrical stage in a direct and unmediated form." ⁴⁰ In his view, the *Shoah* is, paradoxically, of the order of

³⁹Freddie Rokem. *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 36.

⁴⁰Ibid.

phenomena that cannot be explained or represented by the logic of the world or of history, as we know it.

The Holocaust functions as a semblance of the unrepresentable real, which exists according to the logic of a system we do not have the tools to symbolize fully. In other words, the Holocaust cannot in an absolute sense be expressed by representation. In working to unravel the relationship between the real and the representational, Peggy Phelan asserts “our failing eyes may be insufficient organs for measuring the terms and meanings of the transformative alchemy between them.”⁴¹ Phelan’s avowal applies too, to the attempt to give the Holocaust a representational form. The realization that the unadulterated experience of the Holocaust can never be represented in its totality necessarily recurs with each *purimshpil* in which, never the less, intimations of the event are invoked on stage. In turn, this process may produce a profound sense of loss among some audience members. Ultimately, the play (which may, for this audience in particular stimulate memories of the Holocaust) can never express the depth of the actual horror endured.

⁴¹Phelan, *Unmarked*, 180.

For members of the Bobover community, observing the representations in the *purimshpiln* certainly stirs memories of their own or their relatives' traumatic experiences during the Nazi slaughter. Audience members interviewed by Epstein after a performance of the *Play of Daniel* averred that the fiery furnace prompted associations with the concentration camp gas chambers.⁴² For some survivors, the portrayal of young boys emerging intact from the furnace may have a cathartic effect, enabling them to give voice to their parallel experience of having come out of the Nazi brutality alive.⁴³ For others, the plays may make way for an Aristotelian purging of those feelings of trauma they endured and on some level continue to experience. For yet others, plays in which the Jewish protagonists overcome horrendous obstacles ultimately to prosper, may satisfy a psychic desire for retribution. At the same time, the fact that the Holocaust is not directly cited as a subject of the plays leads some audience members to disavow it as a theme.⁴⁴ Of course, some people may be incapable or unwilling to recognize

⁴²Epstein, *Texts*, 63.

⁴³According to the director, Moshe Aftergut, this was the theme of the first *purimshpil* performed after the Holocaust. See Epstein, *Texts*, 61.

⁴⁴When asked if these plays were, in his opinion, about the Holocaust, one respondent replied, "No. After all, they did these plays before. The great

parallels that are clear to others, due to their personal make-up, life experience, or political attitudes. In short, the particular reception of the *purimshpiln* and the place of personal and collective memory in that reception is a complex phenomenon functioning on a social, but also on a highly individual psychic plane. For this very reason, the *purimshpil* is a rich theatrical artifact that can be received and interpreted in vastly different ways by those for whom it was intended. For its community audience--those who are prepared through experience to appreciate them--the Bobover Purim plays are a potent and effective theatrical offering.

This brings to mind the passage of time and its possible consequences for the plays' reception in the future. At some point soon, audience members will be distanced by time from the Holocaust. The generation that escaped from Nazi-occupied Europe to found new Bobover communities is passing on and even the next generation is departing. With the passing last year of Grand Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, who was instrumental in reviving the *purimshpil* practice in the United States, a new era has perforce begun for this community. The next decade or two will

grandfather of the *rebe* was already doing these plays before that time." Shlomo

undoubtedly usher in changes, both in preparation and reception of the plays. In speaking with Moshe Aftergut about the possibility of reviving the play *In the Time of Conquered Poland*, the director asserted that in his view, the play could only be revived with Holocaust survivors playing all the roles, a still possible, but highly unlikely eventuality.⁴⁵

Some determinants of acculturation, such as reverence for the heritage of the ancestors and the complete devotion to the *rebe*, contribute enormously to the maintenance of community traditions. These factors create a stable cultural milieu in the Bobover community. Clearly, however, the *purimshpil* tradition, like every living cultural expression, is subject to at least some change over time. Just as the use of English is more apparent in the Purim plays of today than in those of the first decade, the turning over of the torch to yet a new generation of theatrical practitioners will undoubtedly be accompanied by modifications in the *purimshpil* tradition. I imagine, however, that changes will be incremental. The Bobover system of education--indeed the entire system of socialization in the community--teaches children to willingly turn

Gutter, telephone interview with the author, 19 Sept, 2000.

away from the surrounding society. With each year, Bobover youth delve deeper into the group's practices and folkways, such that assimilation is not a major constituent of Bobover life.⁴⁶

On the other hand, it remains to be seen how a generation of American-born Bobover Hasidim will respond to the *purimshpil* custom. No doubt, the tradition itself is rooted deeply enough within the community to survive well into the future. The magic circles of the *tish* and of the fictive play will remain effective tools for creating those existential historical situations into which, in the service of commemorating the Purim festival, the observant can be brought. In addition, the *purimshpil* has become so identified with the Bobover community that I believe it will remain an important marker of *Bobover* identity as time progresses. Undoubtedly too, the community's legacy of survival against the odds of the Nazi attempt to wipe them out is, and will continue to be, an important part of the Bobover legacy. How individual Bobover members of the future will assimilate that history, and how this process will affect reception of the *purimshpil* remains to be seen. Yet the custom will

⁴⁵Moshe Aftergut, personal communication with author 15 February, 2001.

⁴⁶Robert Mark Kamen, *Growing Up Hasidic: Education and Socialization in the Bobover Hasidic Community* (New York: AMS Press, 1985), 26-29.

continue to work as an aid to historical memory, and it is unlikely that Bobover members will forget their past any time soon. Their worldview is linked so profoundly to that past that forgetting it would be tantamount to disbanding.

Marvin Carlson's article, "The Haunted Stage: Recycling and Reception in the Theatre," illustrates the enormous contribution made by the audience in interpreting a theatrical performance. Interpretation, as he has shown, is fueled by memory. Carlson elaborates Barthes' notion of a text as a complex web of meanings, claiming "we are able to 'read' new works. . . . only because we recognize within them elements that have been recycled from other structures of experience which we have experienced earlier."⁴⁷ In the *purimshpil*, that process of recycling operates in a number of interesting ways.

On the most basic level, all of the Bobover plays are recycled stories and plots. Biblical plays are the most obviously intertextual, taken, as they are, from an oral tradition that was later recorded, redacted, and canonized. The Bible is the well spring of Jewish history, myth, and law. Just as the classic Hellenic theatre reworked

basic Greek myths that were already familiar to theatregoers,⁴⁸ the Bobover theatricals play to audiences already deeply familiar with the characters, plots and conflicts upon which the plays are based. Virtually every Bobover male has spent years studying the (Hebrew) Bible as a legal, historical, scholastic, and religious narrative. Bobover women too, are very familiar with the essence of the biblical texts represented on the Purim stage. Thus, a majority of the Bobover audience will necessarily comprehend the plays within the context of their memory of earlier representations in other genres.

Direct verbal quotations from biblical texts are commonly used as part of the dialogue of the plays, as are the verbatim recitation of prayers and other religious writings during the action of the play. The intertextual nature of the stories, combined with the theatrical mode of presentation affords a special kind of pleasure to audience members. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Hebrew scriptures are generally encountered by the faithful on pages in books, in discussions with study partners,

⁴⁷Marvin Carlson. "The Haunted Stage: Recycling and Reception in the Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 35. 1 (May 1994): 6.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 6-7.

through prayer, and by way of lectures or storytelling (such as the *rebe's* homily). Theatricalization of biblical texts by actors on a stage is not the normative mode of engagement with the scriptural narratives. Hence, for the audience, part of the appeal of taking in biblical narratives in theatrical form may be their very regard of the practice as a Purim inversion of a practice of the Other.

Over the years, the Bobover group has presented numerous revivals of the biblical plays. Thus, viewers are likely to have seen each of these plays in the repertoire more than once. Therefore, it is inevitable that a large proportion of the audience, seeing a biblical play such as *The Sacrifice of Isaac* or *The Play of Daniel*, will have memories of previous Bobover performances of the same play. Memories of these earlier performances become a part of the warp and woof of the strategies used by community members to interpret the play in the present.

Beyond the narratives, many other elements contained in the Purim plays are subject to recycling. Courts are a favorite locale for action, and almost every biblical play consists of one or more episodes in a throne room. Sometimes specific items, such as the king's throne or a golden scepter, are used repeatedly and become

customary and welcome props used in the plays. Characters such as kings, servants, and valiant Jews appear repeatedly as well, eventually becoming stock characters. “Memories of their previous usage,” as Carlson points out, “be they props, character types, plot lines, or many other elements become evocative reminders of earlier plays, adding to the texture of the reception of the plays by audiences.”⁴⁹

In the case of the Bobover community, each play becomes a part of a store of meaningful memories that evoke not just previous performances, but the entire *purimshpil* tradition. Nowhere is this process more powerful than in the attitudes of the audience to the actors on stage. As participants at a community event, most viewers of the *purimshpil* are repeaters, coming yearly to the performances. Since many of the same people act in the plays year after year, spectators have seen actors in more than one role. Thus, a body of associations between actors and the plays develops within the audience. Spectators come to know the acting styles and abilities of individual performers, which adds to the pleasure of seeing them perform.

⁴⁹Carlson, *Haunted Stage*, 9.

Of course, this process occurs in professional theatre as well. Carlson has demonstrated how audience expectation of actors based on past roles contributes to audience enjoyment.⁵⁰ In the folk theatre, however, audience members often know (or know of) actors in their everyday lives outside of the theatrical performances. Therefore, a Bobover member watching an actor in a play sees “in him not only a system of signs but also a living person,”⁵¹ in the words of semiotician Petyr Bogatyrev. This double perception acquires a heightened theatrical effect in the folk theatre where audience members are exceedingly familiar with the extra-theatrical lives of the characters on stage.⁵² The community audience interprets their performances based partially on expectations generated by past roles,⁵³ as well as their every day personae as members of the community. As Carlson argues, “a tension between illusion-fostering and illusion-disrupting elements has always been

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 9-11.

⁵¹Petyr Bogatyrev, “Semiotics in the Folk Theatre,” *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* edited by Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 48.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Carlson, *Haunted Stage*, 11.

characteristic of theatrical reception.”⁵⁴ In the *purimshpil*, these contrasting components heighten the audiences’ enjoyment.

A tension between heterogeneous elements of life is the overriding dynamic fueling representation in the *purimshpil*. As the ideal spectator and the most important actor at the Purim *tish*, the *rebe* presides over a ritual that acknowledges the doubled Hasidic view of existence. In a tradition first articulated by the sixteenth-century mystics, Hasidim are cognizant of the here and now and are simultaneously keenly aware of the world to come. In their worldview, the latter is no less real than the former. According to Kabbalah scholar Lawrence Fine, “the bitterness of the . . . exile and the dread of sin on the one hand, and the anticipated redemption and enthusiasm for serving God on the other,” are the two foci of early Kabbalistic thought.⁵⁵ In this perspective, elation is tempered

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵Fine, “Kabbalistic Texts,” 346-347.

by loss; mourning haunts celebration. At the same time, the reverse is also true. Sadness readily gives way to rejoicing.

The nexus of these differing impulses is not amalgamation into a new, wholly distinct sensibility. Instead, a kind of double vision prevails in which good and bad, sacred and profane, joys and sorrow are always filtered and perceived through the perspective of the other. Thus, the *purimshpil* functions as an exceedingly complex field for the production of meaning. Theatrical representation provides a store of images so complex that for its audience of believers reception is intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually stimulating. Perhaps for this reason, the *purimshpil* as practiced by the Bobover for over a hundred years has survived the precarious vicissitudes of Jewish life in the Diaspora. In this spirit, and in the view of community members, the amateur theatrical event that it is may well prove viable until the advent of the messiah makes it—and all other representation—superfluous. In the meantime, it remains a verdant field for the theatrical and theoretical investigations of the theatre theorist.

Conclusion: Contextual Convergences

The title of this dissertation, "On the Play and the Playing: Theatricality as Leitmotif in the *Purimshpil* of the Bobover Hasidim," posits two activities--that of making theatre and that of playing--as central to the contemporary example of Purim practice analyzed in this study. The folk theatre artifact has an enormous impact on the Bobover Hasidic Purim festival. However, the plays alone cannot entirely account for the most extraordinary characteristic of the Purim celebration, the feeling of exhilaration that abounds within the sphere of every *purimshpil* performance at the *rebe's tish*.

As in any amateur production within a tight knit society, a layer of meaning is created for community members by the recognition of actors on stage playing roles vastly different than those of their everyday personae. Surely, the *purimshpil* can stand on its own as a theatrical artifact rife with meaning. In this sense, the spectacle is not much different than countless other private amateur theatricals presented in schools, homes, religious institutions, and other venues; in fact, performances of this type are a long standing tradition in the history of theatrical performance.⁵⁶

⁵⁶For discussions of some important amateur venues, see Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). See also,

What makes this activity unique is the passionate life force that is so clearly manifested in the extended Bobover Purim ritual. The energy in the auditorium, the air of expectation and tension that continually intensifies until it reaches a crescendo with the *rebe's* entrance, the loving interactions between the *rebe* and the faithful, and the ritualized activities surrounding the plays are all expressions of the vitality of the Bobover group. The *purimshpil* is a living tradition, but even more, it exemplifies the community's tradition of living.

The Nazis succeeded in killing off the majority of the European Bobover community. They failed utterly, however, in destroying the will of the Bobover folk to live (just as they failed miserably in eradicating the Jewish people's inevitable push forward through history). After the war, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam was faced with the responsibility of rebuilding a broken community that had emerged from a shattering experience. In renewing the custom of preparing a *purimshpil* and in seeing to it that it became a

Sybil Rosenfeld. *Temples of Thespis* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1978) and Suzanne Westfall, *Patrons and Performance: Early Tudor Household Revels* (London: Clarendon Press, 1990).

central community event, the *rebe* hastened and presided over a renaissance of Bobover life. I am not claiming that this was the single most important factor of the Bobover renewal over the past fifty years, but surely, it is momentous. Several of the Bobover theatrical practitioners with whom I have spoken have impressed upon me the importance of Purim in their annual life cycle. The huge crowds that throng to the event further attest to the *purimshpil's* significance.

In analyzing the *purimshpiln* over the past nine years, I have continually attempted to comprehend the knowledge theatre studies could gain from an examination of this Hasidic ritual. It could be said that I have insinuated myself into the Bobover performances to ascertain what fruits theatre studies could reap from the sojourn. Perhaps, from the Bobover point of view, I have, like Stargazer, focused on a spurious star.

Yet, my perspective as a theatre historian and theorist has convinced me that the star of theatre helped the Bobover *rebe* immensely in the daunting task of re-birthing his community.' Surely, the community has reaped prodigious rewards from the act of making theatre, although officially, the group does not need, nor

are they interested in what theatre studies reveals about their community or its folk theatrical.

It is both for the benefit of theatre studies, and from the perspective of theatre studies that I have endeavored to describe this example of folk performance accurately. Folk theatre, as Tillis asserts, provides an "unmediated image" of the host culture. The aim of this dissertation, on the other hand, has been to mediate the representations of the Bobover *purimshpiln* with the tools of theatre history and theory. I have postulated the *rebe* as the ideal spectator and demonstrated how the playmakers construct a performance in order to gladden his heart. Undoubtedly, that the Bobover are a "specific and unique community assembled for a particular performance,"⁵⁷ to use Marvin Carlson's phrase, has enabled me to give a picture of audience reception of these plays through studying the customs of the group. A fruitful area of future inquiry would be an investigation of audience response, using interviews, questionnaires, and other means. This type of research could solicit

⁵⁷Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Indiana: Indiana University, 1990), 13.

information specifically from spectators in separate genders and age cohorts to see what perspectives this kind of analysis would yield.

As Carlson notes, audience response in theatre differs from reader response in that the context of theatrical reception is a group experience.⁵⁸ In the *purimshpiln*, the normative reading practice of the Bobover member impinges on the theatrical experience, creating an exceedingly bountiful field of interpretation. The insertion of biblical and midrashic texts into the play performance productively problematizes the reception process in the theatrical event. I have illustrated, for example, how the plague of frogs makes a different kind of splash on the stage than on the page, and how the frogs' effect on the theatre audience is both adumbrated in the midrashic texts and complicated by them. This folk production is made exceedingly prolific by the fact that a large proportion of the other scenes on the *purimshpil* could be similarly harvested for hidden and fallow meanings. I contend that this example of "psychic polyphony," which Carlson defines as the "simultaneous expression of a number of different psychic lines of action"⁵⁹ --creates a rich

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., 101.

poetics on the *purimshpil* stage. Virtually every biblical play, for example is a veritable cornucopia of biblical and midrashic references. Even contemporary plays insert multiple references to texts that are read by Bobover members in their normative practice of studying religious texts.

In *Mourning Sex*, Peggy Phelan asserts that the idea of the ideal spectator drives theatrical representation:

Western theatre is itself predicated on the belief that there is an audience, an other willing to be cast in the role of auditor. The "act" at the heart of making theatre is the leap of faith that someone (that ideal spectator some call "God") will indeed see, hear, and love those brave enough to admit that this is the movement that keeps us from our deaths (or at least from permanently dark houses). The psychic problem raised by theatre is that it remains a perpetual rehearsal. The one for whom the theatre maker makes the piece never arrives for the performance.⁶⁰

The Bobover community has infinite faith that the one for whom its plays are ultimately made will arrive to redeem them at any moment. In the meantime, it is the *rebe's* obligation to his Hasidim to play the role of auditor, and the disciples' obligation to

⁶⁰Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1977), 31.

ensure that the house does not go permanently dark. While the *rebe* and the faithful wait in earthly exile for ultimate redemption, they are also busily building their population and their social organization, thereby celebrating and lamenting their lot within the context of community. More than the actual playlets, it is the fraternal aspect of this activity that gives to the Bobover *purimshpil* its potent force. The event is none other than a cultural triumph for its (own) in-group.

I do not doubt that the tradition of living that is joyfully proclaimed by the *purimshpil* custom will continue unabated well into the future. However, in the coming years, changes in the event will assuredly take place under the new *rebe* as he responds to changing community situations and needs. Additionally, the inevitable deaths of the Holocaust generation may also occasion some modifications in the group's theatrical practice. Will Yiddish, for example, remain the chosen language of the community and of *purimshpil* performances in another one or two decades? Will direct representation of the Holocaust on the Bobover stage ever become possible--or necessary--as the passing of time causes community members to be further removed from the European

generation? Will *shtetl* life continue to be a popular motif for non biblical plays, or will American motifs and situations displace those topics as a larger percentage of Bobover members are American born? The *purimshpil* has proved itself a vibrant and living tradition that has changed over time. Clearly, the custom's future development will be a promising area for further investigation over the next generation.

The *purimshpil* on the stage is one discourse; my analysis in this dissertation is another. Of course, I am not the model Bobover spectator. In some sense, the meeting between this theatrical event and the people who make it on the one hand, and me on the other, is an encounter of cultural opposites. However, my intent has been to fairly illuminate the Bobover tradition while remaining true to the demands of theatre history and theory. If these texts and contexts have converged, as I would like, my work has addressed two readers: s/he who is interested in Jewish life and s/he who is concerned with the theatre. I am hopeful that both these presumed readers have gained access to the life affirming and explosive generativity of the Bobover community--and to the prodigious

contribution of the expressive theatre to that group's remarkable renewal.

Appendix A

From Slavery to Freedom - (*M'Avdus L'Cheirus*) The Story of the Exodus

The following is a synopsis of the *purimshpil* presented by the Bobover community in their house of assembly in Borough Park, Brooklyn, NY in 1992. The performance was directed by Mr. Moshe Aftergut. The videotape was produced by Rabbi Abraham Knochloch and is available from Freedman's Photography, Brooklyn.

The action takes place in two alternating locations: the throne room of the Pharaoh of Egypt and the desert, where the Hebrews are building the pyramids. The synopsis is arranged by scene. Each header outlines the major action of the scene. In the headings, I have tried to express something of the flavor of the spoken introductions occasionally given to scenes in the plays. However, these headers, like the synopses, are my writing.

Scene I: In which we learn of the court of Pharaoh, his magicians, servants, and of the Jewish problem in Egypt.

The curtain opens to reveal the opulent throne room in the palace of Pharaoh. The king enters to a flourish of music, accompanied by two servants flanking him on either side.

They escort him to the throne. Pharaoh chants a rhyming poem in which he muses about his absolute power and status

as a god. He then calls for his three court advisors, who enter together.

The advisors, court magicians, report the terrible financial situation of the kingdom. Pharaoh asks each advisor what should be done about the problem and immediately answers his own question. He complains that since the Jews came to Egypt they have overrun the country, building Talmudic academies and doing nothing other than studying. He asks again what can be done about it.

After some discussion, the advisors agree the Jews should be made to work for the Egyptians. The king asks that two little Jews be brought to see him.

Two Hebrews enter and Pharaoh asks why they are in Egypt. They answer that they do not really know, but that it probably has something to do with brides, grooms, and building. The king angrily responds that they have to learn to work, and they are then taken away.

Next, the king relates a disturbing dream in which an old man with a beard and a little lamb overwhelmed all of the best wizards and all of the great people of Egypt. The advisors

agree the dream portends bad times because of the Jews. They think of ways in which they can neutralize the Hebrews. One advisor offers that they should leave the Children of Israel alone. The king demands to know if his advisor considers his king a coward. The second advisor suggests throwing all children of Jews into the river. The king likes the idea and decrees that every Jewish baby be thrown into the river.

Scene II: In which we learn of the plight of the Hebrew slaves.

Two Hebrew slaves make bricks in the hot desert sun. The first complains of the hard work; of his terrible lot. He sings a plaintive song to God, begging Him to end the torture. The second responds by reminding him that their situation is only getting worse. The first man then begins to faint. He cries out. From offstage, a young child runs to him yelling, "Father, Father, I heard you cry." The father assures the child he is okay. The boy sings a song, a plea to God on the father's behalf. The son runs off to tell his mother that the father is better.

An Egyptian taskmaster enters and beats the Jews for taking a break. Suddenly, Moses enters and orders the Egyptian to take his hands off the Jew. A strange sound emanates from the sky. The Hebrew looks up and the Egyptian drops dead.

Interlude: In which we refresh our senses and laugh.

From the edge of the *tish* a commotion ensues as two Hasidim fight. One takes the hat of his adversary and throws it onto the *tish*.¹ He runs up onto the *tish* to retrieve the hat and the other follows him. The two jesters do an extended comic routine, full of political and community in-jokes.

For example:

Hasid I: "Did you hear that President Bush, Baker, and Buchanan were in a boat that capsized. Who was saved?"

Hasid II: The Jews.

¹In Jewish law a man must have his head covered at all times. Therefore, the Hasid had to go up on to the table to retrieve his hat (though in reality, he was wearing a skullcap underneath the hat all along).

After a fifteen minute interlude of slapstick, jokes, and much physical comedy, the two Hasidim begin arguing about Moses and Pharaoh. Moses appears onstage and scolds them for fighting.

Scene III: In which Moses wonders how he will take care of the Jewish people. God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, instructing him to go to Pharaoh and demand that he let the Israelites out of Egypt.

When the curtain opens, Moses is sitting outdoors before a water-well, thinking aloud. A little sheep sits near him. Moses worries that he must take care of his sheep but that they are thirsty. Suddenly thunder and lighting burst in the sky. The voice of God assures Moses that He knows what a devoted shepherd Moses is. God instructs Moses to take care of the sheep. At the same time, God asserts that He will have to kill all the sheep at once. However, he goes on to assure Moses that there will be a new redemption someday. Moses broods about his job of caring for the Jewish people. He begs

God to look at His sheep. He wonders how long the people will have to endure their trials.

At this point, smoke and flames begin pouring out of a nearby bush. Moses goes over to see what is burning and the voice of God calls Moses. He tells Moses he hears the pleas of the people, and he instructs Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand that the Jews be let out of Egypt. Moses demurs. He complains that he cannot talk to people in such high places; in fact, he cannot even talk very well. God assures Moses that He will take care of him. Moses begs again to be released from the responsibility. God tells him he will send Aaron with him to accomplish the task.

Scene IV: In which Moses and Aaron ask Pharaoh to let the Jews go and Pharaoh responds by making the Jewish tribulations worse.

The curtain opens to reveal Pharaoh's court. The king gloats over how hard the Jews are working, saying that as they work they are forgetting their forefathers. Moses and Aaron enter. Pharaoh demands to know how they got into the

palace. Pharaoh gets nervous, commenting that these men look like godly people. One of his advisors tells him not to worry because he heard that these Hebrews are magicians like the king's advisors. Aaron advises Pharaoh that the Jews must be set free so that they can sacrifice in the desert. Enraged, the king demands to know who sent them. Aaron answers, Elokai, God of Israel.

Pharaoh says he is unfamiliar with the name of that God and calls his servant, Mahmud, to bring the book of records. The servant searches for the name of Elokai, reading off a long list--Karl Marx, Lenin, Breznev, Kruschev, Mao Tse Tung, Chang Kai Sheck and others--but cannot find this new god's name. The King scoffs at the Hebrews and refuses to let the Jews out. Aaron warns him that if he does not do as told, it will be bad for the Egyptians. Pharaoh laughs deeply at the thought. Then he proclaims, "I'll show them. From now on, the Jews will not only have to make bricks, but they will have to collect the straw too."

Scene V: **In which the Hebrew slaves complain that their life has gotten more difficult**

due to Moses' intervention, and Moses speaks to God.

Two Hebrews stand before a microphone and sing a song of lamentation. They tell Moses that now their lot is much worse and ask why he is bothering them. Moses sings out to God, asking why He has made their tribulations more severe. Thunder peals, and the voice of God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him that the Torah is for everyone. God adds, "Let the plagues begin!"

Scene VI: In which God announces the plague of blood.

God's voice rings out, that all will know I am the Creator.

Everything will become blood.

Scene VII: In which God sends the plagues of blood and frogs, and Pharaoh's heart is hardened.

Pharaoh sits on the throne and Moses and Aaron come walking in. Pharaoh asks them why they are back. They reply that they will continue to come until he lets the Jews leave. Aaron then tells Pharaoh that he is going to reveal a secret to him. He sees Pharaoh bathe in the Nile every morning. He declares, "You cannot fool us any longer. Soon, no one will call you God, because we know you are not a god." He tells the king that the real god has said that if Pharaoh does not let the Jews go, the rivers will turn into blood. Moses and Aaron leave.

Pharaoh immediately notices a foul smell, after which there is a sound of running water. He orders Mahmud to get him a drink of water and the servant returns with a glass of red liquid. Pharaoh tastes--then and spits the foul drink out of his mouth. He asks his magicians what they think Moses and Aaron have done.

The advisors conclude that the two must be making magic. Pharaoh says he does not care about their magic. He will not let the Jews out. Shortly after, Moses and Aaron enter again. They threaten to send a plague of frogs that will cover

all their borders. The king ridicules them and says he is not afraid of a few frogs. At this point, there is the loud sound of frogs croaking. A cast member releases a bucket of frogs and the critters hop wildly all over the stage. Everyone onstage begins running after the frogs.

Pharaoh laughs mockingly and orders Mahmud to bring him a sandwich. Mahmud brings a sandwich with a pickle and mentions the frogs in the kingdom. As the king begins to eat, suddenly there are frogs everywhere. The king violently spits a frog out of his mouth. He says, "You think you are telling me? Last night there were frogs in my bed, in my house, in my stomach, in my intestines, frogs." The king realizes he has no alternative but to let the Jews out. Moses and Aaron enter, asking if they thought the frogs were tasty. The King tells the brothers to take their Jews and go. However, after the Hebrews leave and the frogs disappear, Pharaoh reconsiders. He decides the frogs were not so bad after all. He remembers he needs the Jews to work. Moreover, he does not want to become soft hearted; thus, he will not let the slaves go.

Scene VIII: In which Moses warns of the plague of lice and Pharaoh's heart is hardened.

God speaks to Moses, telling him that if Pharaoh becomes obstinate he will send a plague of lice. Indeed, when the curtain opens on the palace, everyone is onstage scratching--except the king. Pharaoh scolds his servants and advisors for being so weak, and tries to get them to stop scratching. In disgust, he tells them all to go. The minute they leave the room, Pharaoh begins scratching himself furiously. In anger, he proclaims, "Now I really won't let the Jews out. I will not bend and bow to them."

Scene IX: In which God speaks to Moses, announcing the plague of darkness.

Thunder sounds and God's voice sounds, declaring that there will soon be darkness in the land.

Scene X: In which Egypt suffers the plagues

of darkness and the slaying of the first born and in which Pharaoh finally lets the Jews out of Egypt.

When the curtains open, the throne room is empty of people, except for the king, who is crawling in the dark. With his hands in front of him, he fumbles around, trying to find his way. He ends up on the *tish*, bumping into audience members. Other characters blindly drift onto the stage. The characters bump into one another, fall down, and resume looking for the king. He calls out for Mahmud. Everyone on stage replies at once.

Mahmud, fumbling in the dark, complains that Moses the magician made it so dark that a fuse must be busted. He finds Pharaoh's throne and sits down. Meanwhile, the king is looking for Mahmud and calling out to him. Someone bumps into the king and says, "Who are you?" Pharaoh declares that he is the Pharaoh. However, Mahmud responds that if he were really the king, he would not let just anyone sit in his throne. Order in the throne room is breaks down completely. Suddenly the king attempts to get back to the throne, trips,

and falls into a big tub of water. The king gets out; dripping wet and walks toward the *tish*, thinking that is the direction of the throne. Hoping to pull Mahmud out of the royal seat, he pulls instead, on an audience member sitting near the *tish*. After some more slapstick antics, the king finally finds Mahmud and forces him out of the chair. Sitting down tiredly, he declares that he cannot bear the plagues any more and asks for Moses and Aaron to be called.

As soon as the brothers enter, the people in the palace regain their sight. Pharaoh begs them to get out and take the people, but to leave the sheep. Moses refuses. The King tells him that at the count of three he wants Moses to remove himself from the court.

In a voice from far away, God sings a plaintive melody to Moses. He warns him that there will be one more plague, after which Pharaoh will let the Jews go. He instructs Moses to go to the people and have them prepare for the Exodus.

Moses speaks to Pharaoh as if God is speaking through him. He claims that when it becomes midnight there will be

another plague and all of Egypt will wither. The first born of every Egyptian will die.

Pharaoh thinks about the various plagues, scratching and biting as he remembers. He counts the plagues out on his fingers. He mentions that with one more, there will be a quorum.² He decides not to worry about it. The king falls asleep on the throne, snoring contentedly. The sound of a bell tolling 11 times and the sounds of children screaming awaken him. Pharaoh realizes that people are dying. He begins to fear for his own family. He calls for Moses and Aaron.

Moses arrives. Pharaoh screams that he has had enough. All of the Israelites can go, with their oxen, their belongings, everything. He orders them to leave at once. Moses replies that Jews do not leave in the middle of the night like thieves. "We will leave at daylight," he says, "as the One Above told us to."

²In Jewish law, there must be a prayer quorum of at least ten adult males. Without this, there can be no public worship. Thus, Pharaoh puns on the law.

He beckons the Jews to gather round. He tells them that it took a long time, but now they will finally begin their journey home.

The penultimate song is sung, in praise of God, and the cast offers a blessing that now the Jews will be able to worship God in their way. They sing of the offering they will make for God in the desert, and of going home, to the Land of Israel, where they will build the complete house.

The rest of the cast comes on stage to sing the final song in homage to the *rebe*. They sing thanks to the *rebe* for his leadership. They declare that they will walk with the *rebe* until the messiah comes.

Fig. 1

Appendix B
Floor Plan of Performance Space

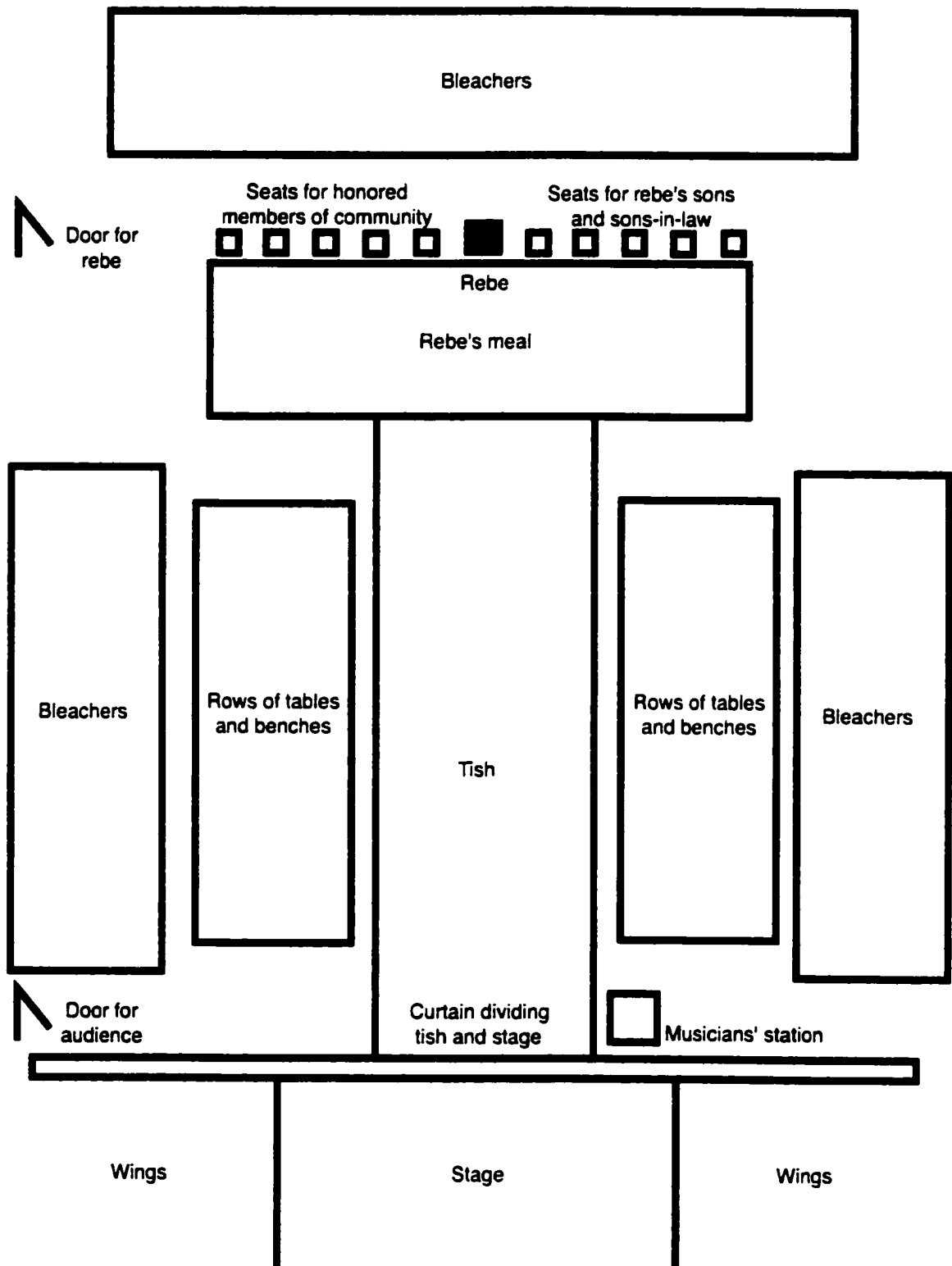
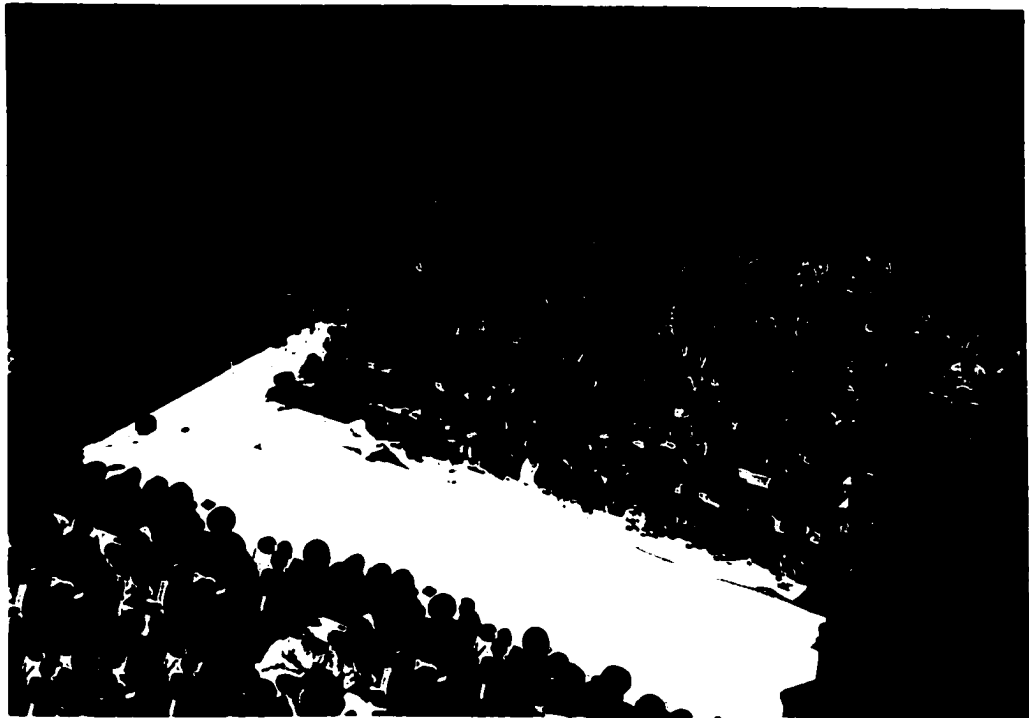
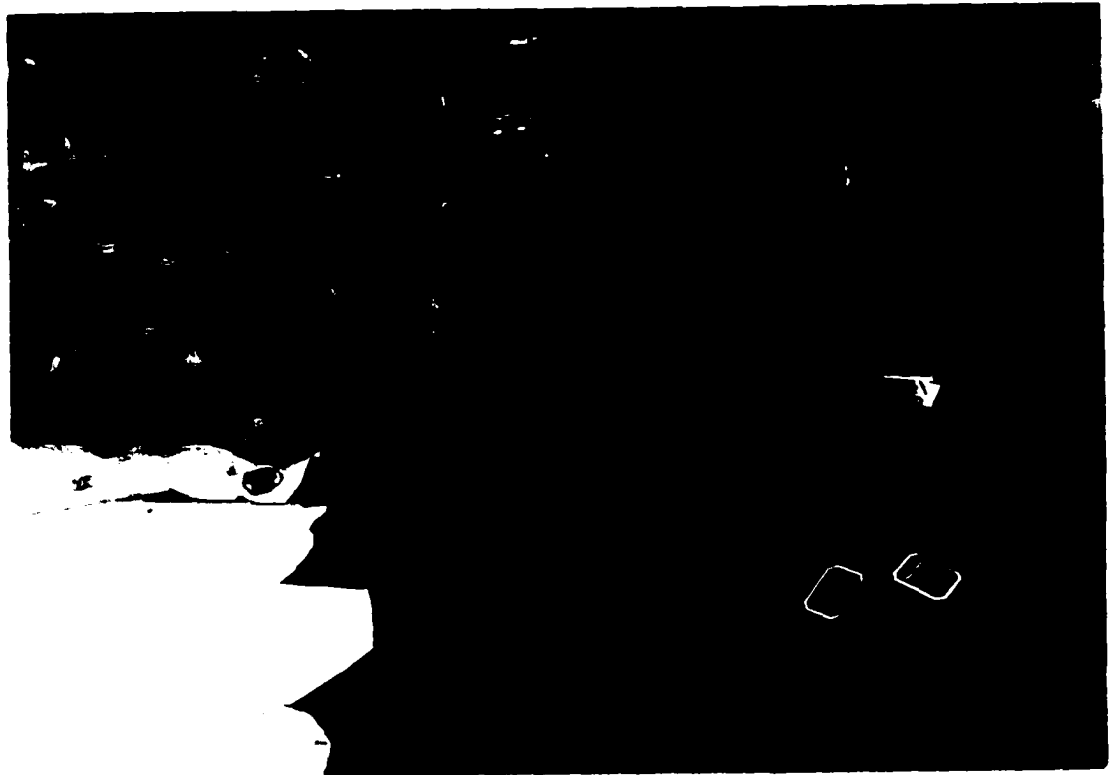


Fig. 2



The *tish*, around which the *rebe* and his disciples sit. In the bottom right corner a curtain hanging on a rod separates the makeshift proscenium from the audience space. The *rebe* sits in the center of the "T", in the middle left. A Purim *challah* sits before the *rebe's* place.

Fig. 3



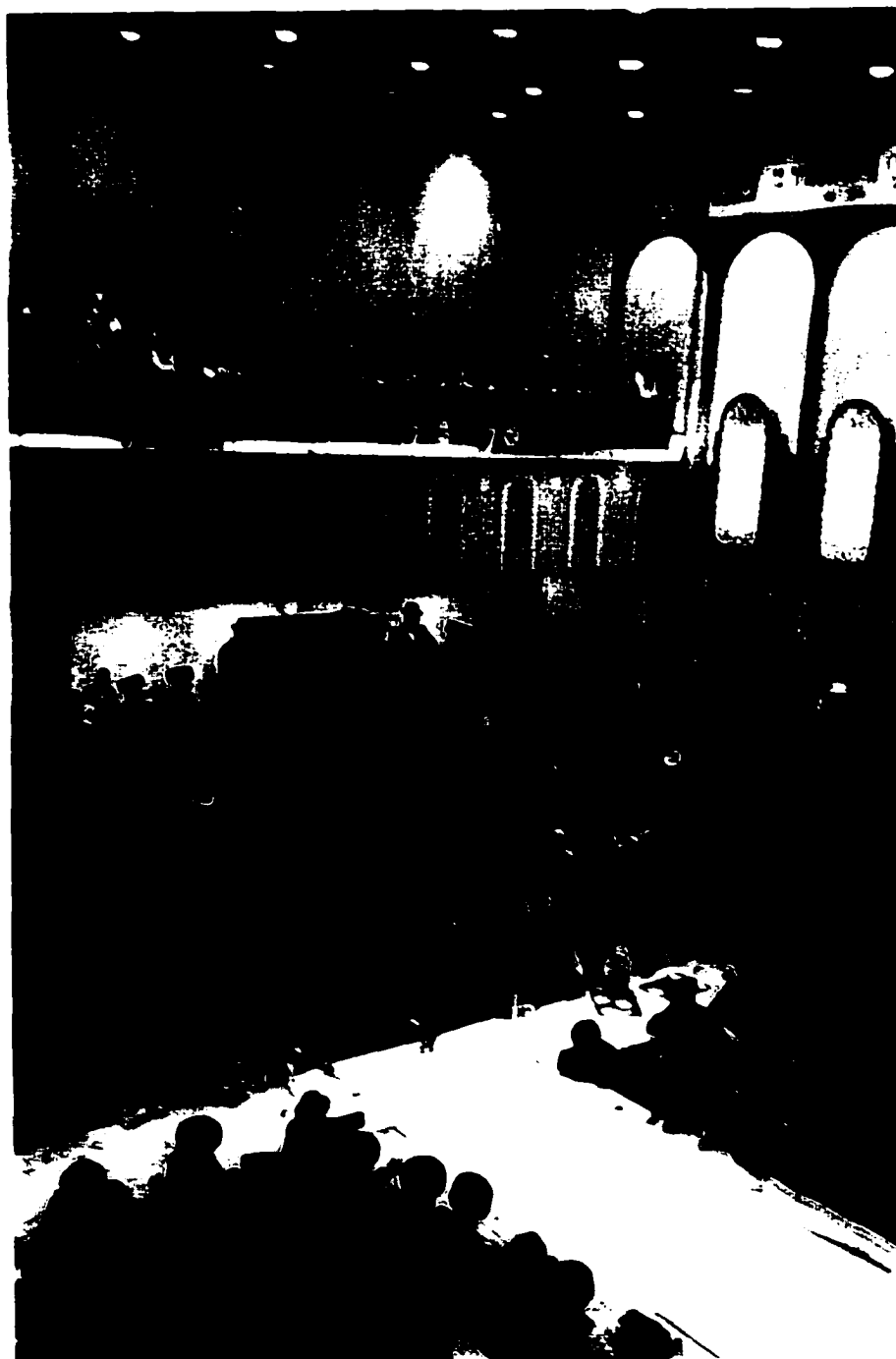
A character stands at the edge of the *tish* during the 1993 performance of *A Match in Brod*. He is facing the *rebe* and the audience. In back of him, on the proscenium stage, are stage settings.

Fig. 4



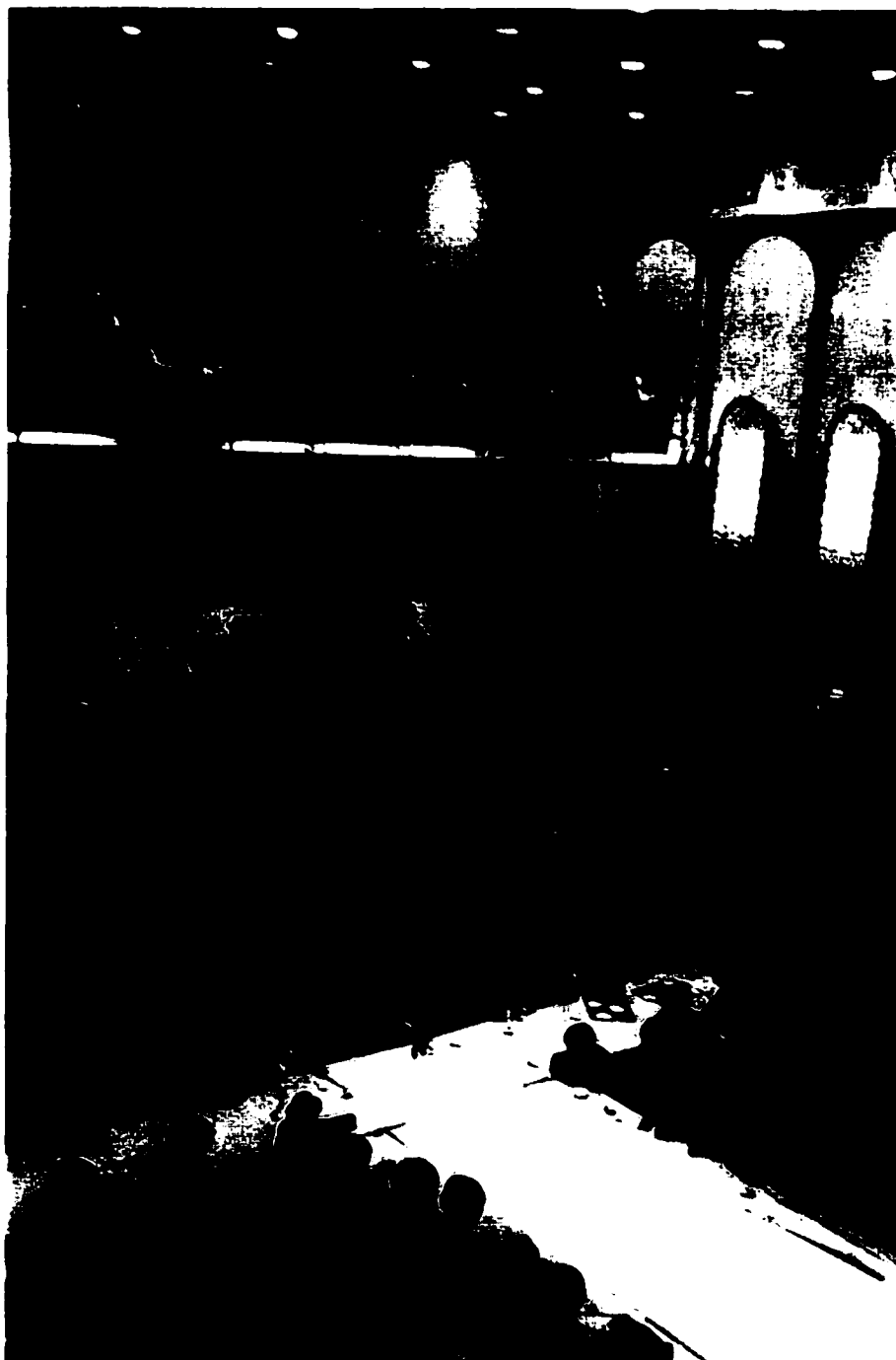
The rows of audience seats closest to the *tish*.

Fig. 5



Tish and women's gallery above.

Fig. 6



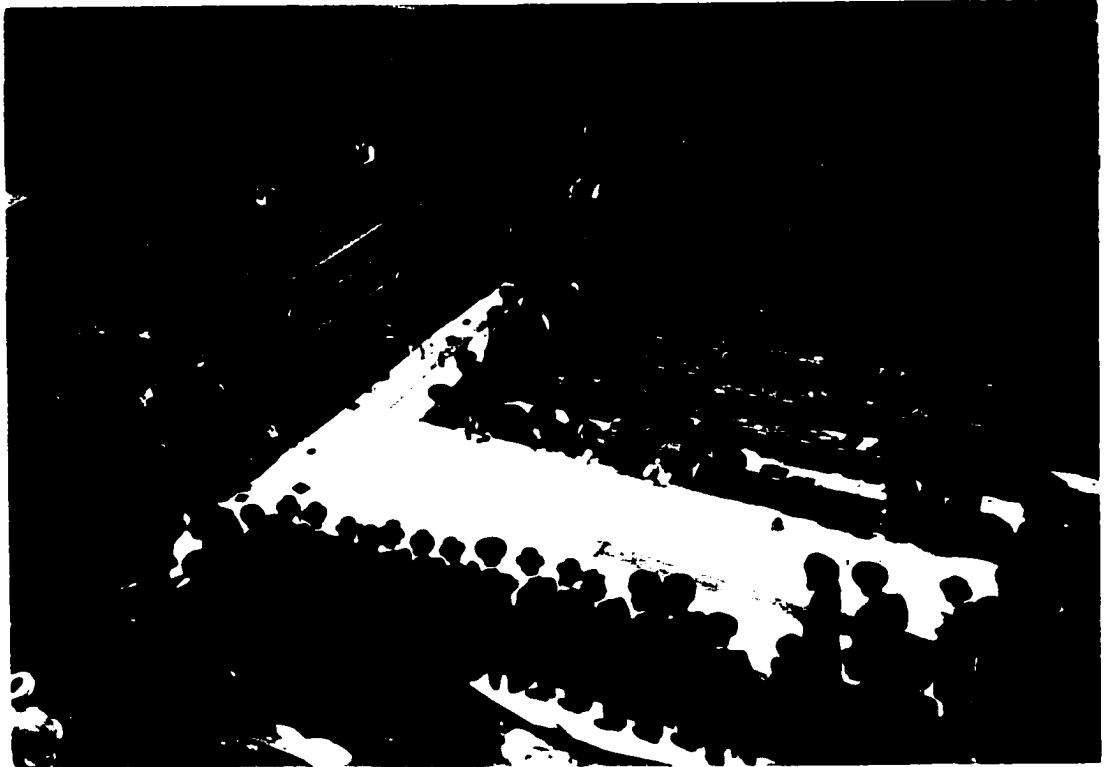
Close up of the *tish*. The former *rebe*, wearing a light colored kaftan, is seated at the center of the "T" before the table in the central place. His son (the present *rebe*) sits to his left.

Fig. 7



A Hasid gives the *rebe* a *kvitl* and speaks to him after the *purimshpil* while other Hasidim await their turns.

Fig. 8



Hasidim sing to the *rebe* after the *purimshpil*.

GLOSSARY

Agaddah - (Hebrew) Legend

Badkhan - (Hebrew) jester

Bes Medresh - (Yiddish) House of Study and Prayer.

Challah - (Hebrew) Braided bread traditionally eaten by Jews on the Sabbath.

D'var Torah - (Hebrew) Words of Torah.

Ein Sof (Hebrew) - without end.

Gemmorah - (Yiddish) Aramaic term denoting the second supplementary part of the Talmud. Part of the corpus of Jewish Law.

Hagaddah/ot - (Hebrew) Book/s containing the home service used during the Passover Seder.

Halakha - (Hebrew) Jewish law

Hasid/im, Hasidic - (Hebrew/Yiddish) a member of a Jewish mystical sect. In Hebrew the word means 'pious one.'

Kabbalah - (Hebrew) Doctrine of Jewish mysticism.

Kvitl, Kvitch - (Yiddish) note/s, requests of the rebe written on paper.

Mashkeh - (Yiddish) Liquor.

Midrash - (Hebrew) Hebrew Lore

Netilat Yadayim - (Hebrew) Ablution

Nigun/Nigunim - (Hebrew) Melody/ies, Hasidic song/s

Pidyon Hanefesh - (Hebrew) Redemption of the soul.

Purim - (Hebrew) Jewish holiday celebrated on the 14th of Adar (in the Jewish calendar) commemorating the Jewish people's escape from Haman's plot to exterminate them. On the Christian calendar the holiday falls during February or March.

Purim Katan - (Hebrew) Small Purim.

Purimshpil/n - (Yiddish) Purim play/s.

Rebe - (Yiddish) appellation of a Hasidic leader.

Roy - (Yiddish) rabbi.

Seder - (Hebrew) the home service on the first and second nights of passover, held around the table, during which the story of the exodus is retold.

Sefer - (Hebrew) book.

Seudah - (Hebrew) banquet.

Shirayim - (Hebrew) Left overs, sacred food shared by the rebe with his disciples.

Shoah - (Hebrew) Holocaust.

Shtetl - (Yiddish) small town or hamlet.

Sukkoth - (Hebrew) Feast of Tabernacles.

Tehillim - (Hebrew) Psalms

Tish/n - (Yiddish) table/s. In Hasidism, the rebe's table, around which the Hasidim gather and at which there is singing, dancing, and words of Torah.

Torah - (Hebrew) The Five Books of Moses; i.e. the Pentateuch. Also refers to the body of Jewish law and lore.

Toyre - (Yiddish) Yiddish pronunciation of the word Torah.

Tzaddik/im - (Hebrew) Righteous person/people.

Yarmulke - (Yiddish) Scullcap

Yeshivah - (Hebrew) An academy for talmudic study, a Jewish day school, a rabbinical seminary.

Yom Kippur, Yom HaKippurim - The Day of Atonement.

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