

Tchotchkes: A Study of Popular Culture in Tangible Form

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Abstract: American-Jewish identity is commonly expressed in decorative objects that are neither liturgical nor traditional, but belong to an ethnic display category of inexpensive items known as “tchotchkes”. This essay examines the great intrinsic value of these mass produced objects in negotiating, reflecting, shaping and reinforcing Jewish identity in contemporary times.

Keywords: *American Judaism, material culture, popular culture, ethnography, identity.*

There is no English equivalent for the Yiddish term *tchotchke*, variously pronounced “choch-kah,” or “choch-kee,” which is increasingly used in vernacular English for mass produced, popular objects like trinkets and curios, figurines, bric-a-brac, souvenirs, and novelty items in the broadest sense of the word. Trivialized in association with low cost and over abundance, *tchotchkes* are rarely the subject of scholarly scrutiny, yet any minority with its own traditional culture will also have its own popular culture—including in tangible form—for which the ubiquitous *tchotchke* may be the best example. For the purpose of this essay, the category will be expanded to include a particular type of soft goods known in Yiddish as *shmatas* (literally “rags”), or off-the-rack, mass produced fashions and fashion accessories. The inclusion of inexpensive, mass produced soft goods is an apt one, for as we are about to see, a *tchotchke* may be best defined as any inexpensive, mass produced object whose intrinsic social value far exceeds its material worth.

IN THE BEGINNING: THE BIRTH OF THE MASS-PRODUCED *TCHOTCHKE*

From the late 1800s through the early 1920s the United States was a major destination for European immigrants fleeing economic, political, and religious oppression. A substantial number of Yiddish-speaking Jews fled Eastern Europe at this time, seeking a future free from religious molestation. However, as Guntis Smidchens notes, their children, like all immigrant children, were “...often ashamed of their parents and the non-American traditions kept at home. For this reason, most children of immigrants reject the language and folklore of their parents, in order to better adapt to American culture. The grandchildren of immigrants, however, have no emotional conflicts like their parents... [having] grown up like

most other mainstream Americans. Members of this generation sometimes... look to earlier generations... or to the homeland of their ancestors, for ways to express their personal ethnic identity.” [Smidchen 1990: 133-134]

The typical adaptive pattern was a bit different for Jewish immigrants. Unlike their fellow arrivals—from Italy and Ireland, for example—most felt little or no nostalgia for the European past, harboring instead a terror of repeating it. Following their protective instincts, many reinforced their children’s desire to assimilate, erasing from mainstream public display any potentially objectionable form of ethnic specificity, including spoken Yiddish. At the same time, however, they made no attempt to conceal their religious affiliation; a conscious demonstration that Jews worship somewhat differently, but are otherwise the same as everyone else—likeable, unthreatening, and worthy of the same respect. If they did not sway every anti-Semitic holdout in the United States, they were at least successful in reversing European patterns of exclusion and violence.

When leaving tenements behind, American immigrants of shared ethnic origin frequently gravitated to the same residential areas, thereby creating insular ethnic neighborhoods. Jews did the same, but they differed in their choice of home décor, avoiding ethnic specificity in favor of neutral Victoriana, and other styles favored by the American mainstream. When practical immigrant objects outlived their usefulness, these were either discarded, or transformed into distinctly *non*-ethnic décor. As Susan L. Braunstein writes: “Cherished copper pots formerly used for making gefilte fish now served as planters...” [Braunstein 1990: 49] In some households one could find etchings of Old Jerusalem, or portraits of Theodor Hertzl, the founder of global Zionism. But Jewish preferences ran more clearly, and more often, to ethnically neutral décor like decorative lamps and ashtrays, china tea cups, and cut glass candy dishes.

The ethnic neutrality valued by Jewish immigrants was fully realized by their children, in an upwardly mobile, but ethnically disintegrating “errand into the suburbs”. [Moore 1987: 105-117] It therefore fell to the immigrants’ grandchildren, fully estranged from the common clay of ethnic neighborhoods, to revive—and of necessity, to sometimes invent--symbols of the ethnic past. Both processes reversed parental patterns of guarded ethnic display, thereby creating a market for popular, easily affordable objects of specifically Jewish ethnicity, known in Yiddish as “tchotchkes.” But by then, few objects of specifically Yiddish ethnicity were either known or recognized. Hence, we will examine the transformation of an ethnically neutral object into an item of invented tradition, followed by the transformation of a once traditional object, into an item of decorative ethnic display. Our discussion begins with the nineteenth century salt box.

INVENTING AND REINVENTING ETHNIC MARKERS: A TALE OF TWO BOXES

The notion of a “Yiddish” salt box is what the ancient philosopher Plato would have called a “simulacrum”: the exact copy of an original that never really

existed. Rather, until the early 20th century, salt was typically sold from barrels and stored at home in handmade wooden boxes. This was the case in the non-Jewish world, as in the typical Jewish village, or *shtetl* of Eastern Europe. Salt boxes had no standard size, but tended to be small; the box pictured here is @ 8” long, 7” tall and 4” deep, with a back panel that extends @ 4” above the lid [fig. 1].



fig. 1 Practical wooden salt box (c. 1820). Courtesy of Jane Martin, Moreland Hills, Ohio

Lids protected the contents from moisture and invasion by insects, while the back panel, perforated once at the top, allowed the box to hang on the wall, above the reach of animals and foot traffic. The association of Jewish ethnicity with the ethnically neutral salt box was probably made through its contents in Jewish context: kosher salt. Facing a poverty of tangible symbols to represent their Yiddish heritage, the immigrants’ grandchildren were pressed to become clever simulators, or modern *bricoleurs* [Levi-Strauss 1966: 17], constructing ethnic signifiers from whatever they had at hand. Hence, the association with kosher culinary tradition was enough to transform an ethnically neutral salt box into a symbol of Jewish ethnicity; first, by marking it *SALZ* [Yid. = salt] and then, by accompanying it with salt and pepper shakers dressed in ethnic garb [fig. 2].



fig. 2 Decorative porcelain salt box marked “salz” in Yiddish, with ethnic salt and pepper shakers (c. 2000). Courtesy of The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore

As noted by anthropologist Anya Peterson-Royce: “The ability of an ethnic group to maintain boundaries, hence survive as a distinct entity, may depend on its ability to marshal an impressive array of symbols.” [Peterson-Royce 1982: 7] Since the box does not represent the current salt-storing convention, it is more clearly decorative than practical, hence the box and figurines together represent precisely what Peterson-Royce proposes: a marshaling of ethnic symbols to create an ethnic boundary, strengthening the family’s ethnic identity, and extending its longevity as an ethnic entity. But oddly enough, it also reflects nostalgia for an ethnic past rarely missed by those who actually lived it.

Nostalgia for cosmetic, or prettified, versions of shtetl life finds expression in many forms of American popular culture, as in theater and film productions of *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on the Yiddish writings of Shalom Rabinowitz [1859-1916], known by the Hebrew pseudonym Shalom Aleichem or “peace be with you.” But Rabinowitz omitted all facts of shtetl life which did not enhance the romantic vision he wished to project. [Miron 2000: 4] Hence, his popularity has little to do with ethnographic accuracy, and stems instead from his ability to represent Yiddish folklife the way we really want to remember it—not necessarily the way it really was. [Neulander 1998: 225-238] The same nostalgia takes tangible form in the wooden-lidded, porcelain salt box seen here. With its Yiddish reference to salt, accompanied by cherubic peasant salt and pepper shakers, it forms a display that both constructs, and reinforces cultural ties between the real American present and the imagined European past. However, as we are about to see, not all Yiddish markers are invented traditions; obsolete traditional objects also find new life as items of purely decorative ethnic display.

The evolution of the *tzedakah*, or charity, box is similar to that of the salt box, although it is a traditional, rather than an invented, ethnic marker. Pronounced “tzeh-dab-kah” the term derives from the Hebrew root for “justice” and “righteousness,” since almsgiving was seen as just and righteous behavior, and was required of all Jews, even those who themselves received alms. The biblical concept was later modified to include empathy for those who require charity, thereby transforming what might have become a routine, or rote, donation into what the rabbis called *gemilat hasadim*, or “acts of loving-kindness.” Hence, Jewish charity must shield the identity of the recipient in order to spare the individual from public humiliation, it must be given in a manner that builds the recipient’s morale and self-respect, and it must avoid creating financial dependency on the part of the recipient.

Following these imperatives, large communal tzedakah boxes were found at the entrances of synagogues, schools and cemeteries throughout Eastern Europe. But charity was incumbent on every individual, hence even the humblest household had its own small variant. The non-descript receptacle was of no standard size, design or material, and was kept at any locale convenient for depositing pocket change. By the turn of the 20th century, however, the tradition began adapting to

life in the United States. Prosperity brought by the Industrial Revolution, the development of metal alloys, and the ability to emboss them, combined to create tin boxes embossed by individual charities and distributed throughout the immigrant community [fig 3].



fig. 3 Practical tin tzedakah [charity] box, made in USA (c. 1900).
Courtesy of The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore

The tin box shown here, distributed in the early 1900s for an orphanage in Israel, and embossed in both Hebrew and English, is a prime example of the immigrant genre.

Today, the tzedakah box is no longer the engine that drives Jewish philanthropy. It has given way to highly coordinated efforts by professional philanthropic, legal and business organizations. But the household charity box, no longer in common use, has not disappeared from Jewish homes. It has simply been replaced by mass produced, decorative variants. The association with charity makes the object desirable, in an array of handmade, personally engraved and otherwise expensive materials, as an honorary tribute for individual acts of outstanding philanthropy. But across the globe, inexpensive, mass produced tzedakah boxes are in popular demand as ordinary household décor, embodying, or symbolizing, the ethical principles of Jewish communal life. Modern demand for such decorative objects, and the working class ability to purchase them, has spawned an entire industry in their mass production--one that sometimes creates culture contact between the most unexpected of people, places and things. The box shown here, for example, made of shocking pink porcelain and marked "tzedakah" in Hebrew, is mass produced in China for the American-Jewish market [fig 4].



fig. 4 Decorative porcelain box marked “alms” in Hebrew, made in China (c. 2000).
Courtesy of The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore

In these decorative boxes, we can see the same social functions William R. Bascom [Bascom 1965: 279-298] first noted for the various genres of folklore, which can be extended to traditional handmade objects, as well as to liturgical and ceremonial objects. But Bascom’s social functions are rarely, if ever, discussed in terms of popular mass produced objects. As items of ethnic display, however, mass-produced objects clearly perform the same social functions; they create a shared cultural experience, and they reflect adult values, thereby imparting them to the young. Within the family, their broad-based appeal breeches gaps of gender and generation, and creates common clay with other community members who enter the home. Like the skillfully crafted objects found in Jewish liturgical and ceremonial tradition, the unskilled, mass produced tchotchke clearly does culturally significant work, specifying and strengthening the group’s identity, and therefore its endurance as an ethnic entity. But the inexpensive tchotchke’s valuable social functions do not begin and end with the drawing of ethnic boundaries.

POPULAR OBJECTS AS TANGIBLE FORMS OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

Rather than a passive reflection of ethnic self-definition, the tchotchke can also function to raise social consciousness, and effect social change. Self-criticism can be a particularly powerful agent of such change, if leveled through ethnic humor. Armed with the built-in escape clause “just kidding,” or “it was just a joke,” humor has historically been used to deliver criticism which is not only timely and funny, but as James Scott puts it, “oblique, symbolic and too indefinite to incur prosecution.” [Scott 1990: 138] As such, it is a favorite vehicle for ethnic self-criticism which, by definition, is leveled from within the community itself, by critics who might otherwise be vulnerable to censure. American Jews are no exception to this rule. One such humorous vehicle of Jewish self-criticism can be seen here, in an ornately packaged set of comparatively plain holiday tchotchkes, alerting us to the fact that the package itself is meant to arrest our attention.

The elaborately packaged Hanukkah *menorah* [Heb. = candelabrum, pronounced men-*no*-rah], and its accompanying candles, are refrigerator magnets built upon traditional ceremonial models [fig. 5].



fig. 5 Hanukkah refrigerator magnets in traditional Talmudic format; centrally packaged with surrounding social commentary (c. 2000). Object owned by author

On display almost everywhere that Jews shop for Hanukkah gifts, the message on the eye-catching package can be seen as a form of mass communication. Thus, given the humorous context of the packaging, the set and package together can be seen as a tangible form of ethnic self-criticism, keeping in mind that laughter signifies recognition of something absurd, or out of order; without such recognition, we would have nothing to laugh at.

In this case, criticism is directed at the (absurd, or out-of-order) commercialization of a spiritual Jewish holiday; one which has evolved from a non-gift-giving, minor celebration into a frenzy of conspicuous consumption associated with the commercialization of Christmas. Highlighting the spiritual emptiness of seasonal consumption for consumption's sake, the magnets have no application to the candle-lighting ceremony they represent, since they preclude all possibility of what is actually intended: the ceremonial lighting of candles. The package itself is a flat broadside with commentary in the margins (a traditional Talmudic format), using a rabbinic image of spiritual leadership to pose the mercenary, materialistic question: "*would it kill you to buy two?*" Thus, the elaborately packaged Hanukkah set performs at least two social functions for the ethnic community; it raises collective awareness of what is socially disturbing, and by being funny, it effects social change, for in that moment of grasping the absurd, the collective distances itself socially from the very faux pas it laughs at. [Ben-Amos 1973: 112-131] By thus gaining social distance from mainstream holiday mania, the community gains a measure of insulation from the worst of its excesses. Hence, in the packaged

Hanukkah magnets, we see a set of tchotchkes skillful at leveling social criticism which would be less socially acceptable, and certainly less effective, in some humorless form of mass communication.

THE TCHOTCHKE AS A DEMOCRATIZING AGENT

Whatever else they may accomplish tchotchkes routinely and effortlessly break boundaries of economic rank and privilege. Almost everybody owns at least one, regardless of economic station. Moreover, while few among the wealthiest of Jewish connoisseurs can afford a canvass by a renowned Jewish artist like Marc Chagall, most average consumers have no access at all to Chagall exhibitions and many are unable to buy the kind of pricey publications that feature artistic masterpieces. Yet, insofar as Chagall's work appears on cheese boards, decorative plates, T-shirts, yo-yos, wall calendars and place mats, no working class Jew need grow up unaware of him. Thus, the tchotchke can function as an egalitarian, democratizing agent, providing exposure to elite artworks at every economic level.

Although museum pieces are beyond the means of most art connoisseurs, a number of other objects d'art are more easily accessible to them. Were it not for popular mass produced variants, however, such coveted objects would remain beyond the means, and even the awareness, of many working class consumers. One such example is the prized "Jerusalem" sculpture created by artist Frank Meisler, who works in a combined studio and foundry in the Old City of Jaffa, Israel. The particular example seen here stands @ 10" high on a baby grand piano in an elegant home in Baltimore, Maryland [fig 6].



fig. 6 "Jerusalem" by sculptor Frank Meisler, cast bronze with silver and gold plate (c. 2000). Courtesy of Jan Weinberg, Baltimore, Maryland

Literature accompanying Meisler's work describes the artist as born in Danzig, educated in England, and the subject of one man exhibitions from New York and Washington to London, Caracas and Geneva. The literature explains his

use of *cere perdu*, or the “lost wax” process, as well as sand- and investment-casting, to construct his bronze sculptures. Readers are further informed that each piece is individually cast, ground and polished, then silver and gold-plated where required, and finally assembled to create a completed work in precious metals.

Because Meisler’s classic “Jerusalem” has broad popular appeal, but is beyond the means of many consumers, it was probably inevitable that inexpensive variants or “knock-offs” would enter the tchotchke market. Clearly inspired by Meisler, the plastic paperweight seen here is a mass produced souvenir of Israel, and is part of a tchotchke collection on display in a secretary’s office in Kent, Ohio [fig. 7].



fig. 7 “Jerusalem” paperweight, plastic souvenir of Israel (c. 2000).
Courtesy of Regina Witsaman, Kent, Ohio

Similarly, the same image—in even more humble form—serves as a key ring for a grad student at Indiana University [fig. 8].



fig. 8 “Jerusalem” key ring (c. 2000).
Courtesy of anonymous grad student, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Although such mass produced objects are no competition for skilled artworks, consumers are not aesthetically offended. Rather, in selecting a tchotchke,

the object's breaking of elitist boundaries, along with its ethnic boundary-building, appear to take precedence over its potential aesthetic value. According to Nelson Graburn, ethnic souvenirs "...have often been despised by connoisseurs as unimportant, and are sometimes called "tourist" or "airport" arts. They are, however, important in presenting to the outside world an ethnic image that must be maintained and projected as part of the all-important boundary-defining system. All human social groups, from the family to the United Nations, need symbols of their internal and external boundaries; the practical and decorative arts often provide these essential markers." [Graburn 1976: 1-32] With some notable exceptions, Jews who seek ethnic self-definition are either unlikely, or unable, to buy expensive artwork for that purpose. Rather, as a group, they constitute a mass market for inexpensive knockoffs, and for the type of easily affordable, emblematic figurines like those shown here [fig. 9].



fig. 9 Iconic Jewish figurines showing social changes over time, e.g. Hasidic dancer and Bat Mitzvah girl (c. 2000).
Courtesy of Larry and Jodi Solomon, Merkaz Judaica, Woodmere, Ohio

Two of the most popular among such figurines include the woman lighting Sabbath candles, and the fiddler on the roof (an icon actually introduced by Chagall, immortalizing his eccentric Uncle Noya, who invented rooftop fiddling when driven from the house). But if tchotchkes have democratized home décor, they can also reflect democratizing social change within the community, over time and across space. For example, figures of dancing men refer specifically to the charismatic Hasidic movement that swept through Eastern Europe in the mid-1700s, declaring a peasant's dance of joyful praise as equal, in God's eyes, to the lofty rabbi's stellar scholarship. Similarly egalitarian in spirit, the emblematic Bar Mitzvah boy (typically reading from, or carrying the Torah), has acquired a female equivalent: the Bat Mitzvah girl. Inclusion of girls in the traditional rite of passage first took place in the United States in 1922, long before the emergence of mainstream feminist and civil rights movements. Yet, by the turn of the twenty-

first century, the Bat Mitzvah girl had gained approval in even the most resistant branches of Judaism, as confirmed here in popular, tangible form.

Attesting to their great intrinsic value, tchotchkes are often on display alongside ceremonial objects and elite objects d'art strategically placed in the living room, the den, the family room, the great room, the kitchen, or that "public" sector of domestic space where a given family chooses to entertain visitors. Robert Teske describes this designated space as that part of the house "where the [ethnic] family represents itself to the outside world." [Teske 1979: 2-31] Similarly, Smidchens likens any sectioned-off space reserved for ethnic objects (whether a self-contained curio cabinet, piano top or other designated display area), to a shrine: "The mantelpiece, a place where Americans usually put family pictures and bowling trophies is transformed into an ethnic shrine: decorative [pieces]... bought at tourist stores in the homeland... at local ethnic arts and crafts meetings, along with religious icons, flags and emblems of the homeland—all are placed in prominent view as symbols of the family's ethnic heritage." [Smidchen, 1990: 138]

Clearly, tchotchkes can be powerful democratizing agents, transcending class and social barriers, exposing all classes to elite artwork, and effecting, as well as reflecting, egalitarian social change. As real or imagined ethnic markers, they create distinctly Jewish boundaries at all levels of modern, assimilated populations. But tchotchkes are also able to draw modern, assimilated boundaries around distinctly Jewish populations; that is, they are able to represent hyphenated states of cultural pluralism, such as *American-Jewish* identity.

AMERICANIZATION: JEWISH IDENTIFICATION WITH MAINSTREAM CULTURE

Adding American signifiers to one's cadre of self-defining ethnic markers is often equated with a loss of ethnic boundaries. Anxiety over the "Americanization of..." all things Jewish, is evident in the historic and ongoing proliferation of American books and articles with that particular phrase in the title. But historically, influences flow back and forth between cultures living in proximity, expanding the cultural repertoires of all, without threatening the distinction of any. In most cases, different musics, languages and foodways constitute the prime currency of this negotiation, referred to by folklorists as "cultural exchange."

An excellent example of cultural exchange appears in Steven Zeitlin's description of his Uncle Oscar's *katzatske*, a traditional Russian dance done by Oscar and his sons, at Zeitlin family weddings: "Oscar bends, kicks his legs out, squats, jumps. Its old-country kazatske... Suddenly he reaches for a napkin, ties it around his head and walks to the rhythm like a half crippled man. Above the instruments blaring out "Havah Nagilah," he whistles piercingly, pretends to be playing a fife in "The Spirit of '76." [Zeitlin 1982: 213-21]

Given Oscar's performance, the wedding is no less a Russian-Jewish event, but one that is now augmented by an American "ad lib." His Americanization of the family's Russian-Jewish tradition transforms the dance—not into a less

Russian-Jewish event, but into an American-Russian-Jewish event—one that gives more accurate expression to the current identity of the now American, as well as Russian-Jewish, Zeitlins. The same process can occur in tangible form, and in the United States, it often finds expression in English-ethnic wordplay.

The printing of text on household items, and on wearable soft goods, is a decorative style so quintessentially American, its use as a means of ethnic signification may itself be an Americanization [fig. 10].



fig. 10 English-ethnic wordplay on mass produced objects and off-the-rack soft goods (c. 2000). Courtesy of The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore

Here we see but a few examples of the genre in American-Jewish context; didactic coffee mugs giving the Hebrew for Mother [*ima*] and Father [*aba*], a mug using Hebrew letters to spell the iconic American brand name “Coca-Cola,” and a mug that conflates Hebrew with the regional Southern vernacular, declaring (as they actually do in the South): “Shalom Y’all.” Similarly, we can see a potholder featuring a chef’s hat, which uses Hebrew letters to phonetically spell the English word “chef,” and a baby bib using faux Hebrew letters to spell the Yiddish words *Shayna Punim* [beautiful face] in English. Finally, we see an off-the-rack shmata embossed with English letters spelling “Happy Hanukkah,” a clearly Jewish adaptation of popular, off-the-rack, “Merry Christmas” sweatshirts.

Certain forms of popular literature, like comics and cartoons for example, also find tangible expression on off-the-rack soft goods, and as children’s toys. Comic books, along with the media productions and popular objects they inspire, have been rife with cultural exchange between Jewish and non-Jewish Americans since at least 1937, when publisher Jack Liebowitz (1900-2000) founded a company that grew to encompass DC, Action, and All American comics. The first printing of Action Comics (Vol. 1, June 1938) sold out at 200,000 copies, total sales hitting one million in the first 30 days of publication. The historic issue featured an Alien-American Culture Hero called “Superman,” created by two Jewish teenagers from Cleveland, Ohio.

Not surprisingly, popular commentary cites as “Jewish” a number of episodes in the Superman saga which actually appear in many distinct cultures, according to Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. [Thompson 1956-1958] One such example is the infant Superman’s arrival on Earth in a tiny ship

dispatched by his desperate family, preceded in time by the infant Moses' arrival at Pharaoh's court in a tiny ship dispatched by *his* desperate family, thereby making the episode "Jewish" in the popular view. But Thompson's motifs for this episode include S.331. *Exposure of child in boat (floating chest)* and L.111.2.1. *Future hero found in boat (basket, bushes)*, both of which predate Jewish tradition. For example, the infant Sargon, future Culture Hero and founder of the ancient Kingdom of Akkad, was exposed on a river in a basket of bulrushes, 400 years before the infant Moses, future Culture Hero and founder of the Israelite nation, was similarly exposed. In turn, Moses was followed by others, most notably the twin infants Romulus and Remus, future Culture Heroes and founders of the City of Rome. Rather than a Jewish ethnic marker, the motif is more clearly an ancient literary device for signifying the birth of a future Culture Hero.

What is "Jewishly" significant is the disproportionate number of Jews who appear among creators of preeminent comic book heroes, including but not limited to Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, *Superman*; Stan Lieber, *Spiderman*; Bob Kane, *Batman*; Peter David, *The Incredible Hulk*; Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, a virtual army of mutant, anthropomorphic *X-Men*. Historically, some of these authors substituted for each other along the way, but not all were equally qualified as graphic artists. Yet, the roster of Jewish comic book artists is equally impressive, including but not limited to such luminaries as Alex Blum, Will Eisner, Louis Fine, Morton Meskin, Alex Schomberg, Mike Sekowsky, and Ben Chapman. Thus, we may safely cite Jewish authors and artists as purveyors of major superheroes to the American mainstream, which in turn, has embraced the superhero as an ethnically neutral, secular American role model. I would like to suggest, however, that comic book heroes are not only of Middle Eastern descent, but represent a tradition more ancient than is generally recognized, which may account for their curious juxtaposition in American-Jewish context: excluded from specifically Jewish comic books, but widely reproduced (along with Disney cartoons) on traditional children's *kipot* [Heb. = skull caps, pronounced *kee-pote*].

Although *kipot* do not fulfill any commandment, they are worn at all times by Orthodox males, and in more recent times, by males and females from all branches of Judaism who may elect to wear them, usually for prayer and study. Most parents tell us they purchase cartoon-decorated *kipot* because these are easily affordable and children like them best. But an explanation of the folk rationale for covering one's head may provide a better explanation for the community's discomfort with modern cartoon characters in children's comic books, and its comfort with them on children's *kipot*.

Most of us have seen photos and/or drawings of the ancient *charuvim* [Heb.= cherubs, pronounced *hah-roo-veem*], or sphinx-forms of old, frequently seen in Sunday school books and other texts on the ancient Middle East. These are creatures with human heads, often royally crowned and bearded in the manner of Kings and Culture Heroes, also endowed with huge wings, the bodies of bulls or lions, and sometimes, scales and gills. Such figures are explicitly anthropomorphic,

combining attributes found only among discreet species in the natural world (the crowned and bearded head of the human King or Culture Hero, the bodily strength, virility, and speed of powerful quadrupeds, along with the avian ability to defy gravity, and the aquatic ability to breathe under water). In Middle Eastern antiquity, the conflation of characteristics from discrete species into one composite entity, signified a necessarily *supernatural* being; one whose particular combination of attributes superseded the natural order of Creation. In ancient Middle Eastern sensibility, such composites of otherwise discrete categories harkened to the Chaos of *pre*-Creation, still extant outside the boundaries of This World, in the supernatural Otherworld. [Neulander 1992: 3-18]

Thus, we find ancient *charuim* posted like prepossessing border guards, at the entrances and exits of temples and tombs; the junctures of sacred and mundane space. Bearing characteristics of both worlds, they stood with a foot in each, making powerful ambassadors (perhaps the first guardian angels), their marvelous size and appearance alerting residents of both realms to observe the proper protocols at every juncture between the two, for to breach that border was to destroy the ancient world.

The same supernatural anthropomorphism and protectiveness can be seen in the marvelously caped and costumed heroes of American comic books, who keep invasive forces—eruptions of chaos, in fact—from disrupting the realm of law and order. Given the secularism of mainstream comic books, however, it is not surprising that specifically Jewish comics draw from the same graphic format, but not from the same graphic gene pool of modern superheroes. As we might anticipate, American-Jewish comics draw from native Jewish sources, featuring traditional biblical, folk and Culture Heroes; in this case from the medieval Yiddish legend, *The Golem* [Bin Gurion 1990: 261-271], a giant, artificial human, designed to protect defenseless Jews from all manner of evil [fig. 11].



fig. 11 Superheroes and Disney cartoons on kipot; Jewish heroes only, in Jewish children's comic books (c. 2000). Courtesy of Larry and Jodi Solomon, Merkaz Judaica, Woodmere, Ohio

But as we can see, the same anthropomorphic superheroes (and similarly anthropomorphic human/animal Disney cartoons) which are virtually absent from Jewish children's comics, are prolific on their traditional kipot. The reason is apparently linked to why Jews elect to wear kipot at all. That is, Jewish folklore contends that kipot are meant to create a canopy, or covering, between the juncture of the corporeal body and the spiritual realm, as between the top of the head and the heavens that roil above it. The notion is built upon the Yiddish word for "skull cap" = *yarmulka*, which according to folk etymology derives from the Aramaic *yarey malka* = "he is in awe of the King [of the Sacred Realm]" and therefore keeps his head covered. [Jacobs 1999: 306] Hence, it is not so mysterious that the supernaturally anthropomorphic likes of Spiderman, Batman, Mickey Mouse and other humanized animals do not appear in American-Jewish children's comics, but do Americanize their traditional kipot, still guarding the border, as in days of old, like ancient *charwim*.

Children's toys, like children's heroes, are powerful agents of anticipatory socialization. As Roland Barthes writes, toys "prefigure the adult world," [Barthes 1972] helping children master through play, the attitudes, behaviors and gender roles approved by adult society. The challenge to American-Jewish parents is to marry secular American playthings to Jewish ideals and values, thereby creating a market for toys of hyphenated, or specifically American-Jewish identity.

Nowhere is that impulse clearer than in the Jewish adoption of plush toys in general, and in particular, the teddy bear, a distinctly American invention born 25 miles north of Vicksburg, Mississippi, in November, 1902. On the twelfth of that month, *The Washington Post* reported that President Theodore Roosevelt was on a hunting trip in the area. Accounts differ somewhat, but whatever the actual details, a mother bear was shot and political cartoonist Clifford Berryman seized the moment, sketching her cub being tied to a tree, and Roosevelt refusing to shoot it. Berryman inscribed the image "Drawing the Line in Mississippi" [fig. 12].



fig. 12 Captured by a political cartoonist, Teddy Roosevelt refuses to shoot a bear cub, inspiring a line of plush toys called "teddy bears" (Nov. 1902). Image in the public domain

The illustration captured public sentiment, and inspired the mass manufacture of plush toys at first called “Berryman’s bears,” or “Teddy’s bears,” and later shortened to “teddy bears.”

Over the course of the past century, plush toys have evolved into countless forms of cuddly, huggable critters and creatures of great popular appeal. But never with greater panache than in American-Jewish context, where a core value like “love of Torah,” is imparted and thereby internalized, through a huggable, lovable, happy-faced Torah [fig.13].



fig. 13 Playthings marry Jewish values to the American plush toy tradition (c. 2000).
Objects owned by the author

Ethnic identity and ethical values are also imparted in association with holidays like Purim (recalling a Jewish heroine who saved her people from the genocidal villain, Haman), and Hanukkah (recalling the first recorded battle for freedom of religion), both of which are particularly popular with children because of the activities, treats and/or gifts associated with them. Purim and Hanukkah are represented here, respectively, in a toy that wears athletic shoes, named *Nosh* [Yid. = snack] *the Hamantasch* [Yid. = “Haman’s Pocket,” a traditional three-cornered Purim cake, pronounced *hab-men-tahsh*], and a mainstream American teddy bear with an emblematic Hanukkah menorah on its chest, wearing a *kipah* [Heb. singular of kipot, pronounced *kee-pah*]. As we can see, Americanizations like cartoon-decorated kipot, a Purim toy in American athletic gear, a plush Torah scroll, and a Hanukkah teddy bear, do nothing to diminish Jewish identity; rather, they enable Jewish children to maintain their ethnic boundaries while participating in the mainstream culture. Thus, the Americanization of Jewish play, as of other cultural phenomena, is more clearly a self-defining friend than the self-defeating foe of popular imagination.

Whenever cultures experience contact we can anticipate cultural exchange. But in the United States, the phenomenon extends beyond exchange with the mainstream to active cultural exchange between different ethnic minorities. To reflect the ongoing viability of a single ethnic community in the midst of such active cultural exchange, we would expect an unambiguous expression of the

group's ethnic identity, but in a multi-hyphenated or "American-multiethnic" form, as in the case of the American-Russian-Jewish *kazatzke*. To handle the challenge in tangible form, we turn to one of the more muscular signifiers of all tchotchke genres: the ethnic party favor. Specifically, we turn to the distinctly Scandinavian-American--but also Jewish--Bar Mitzvah Troll [fig. 14].



fig. 14 Multicultural exchange: the Scandinavian-American—but also Jewish—Bar Mitzvah Troll (c. 2000). Courtesy of The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore

As an unambiguously Jewish celebration of America's multicultural mainstream, the object has an unusually high delight quotient. But it is also a tangible confirmation of ongoing Jewish viability within the cultural conglomerate.

HEBRAIZING AMERICA: MAINSTREAM IDENTIFICATION WITH JEWISH CULTURE

Up to this point, our focus has been on marshaling symbols to create and maintain a clear and enduring Jewish, and/or American-Jewish, boundary. But cultural exchange is almost always a two-way street. Hence, when a Jewish cultural item transcends its own ethnic boundaries, and is admitted to the mainstream, the mainstream is identifying with the Jewish item, thereby effecting its own "Hebraization." Hebraization need not always occur at the national level. It can occur by regional or geographical area. In the Spanish-speaking southwest, for example, where green chili is among the most prominent of regional foodways, local bakeries have long supplied a popular demand for "green chili bagels" [fig.15].



fig. 15 Hebraization of the mainstream; the Southwestern green chili bagel (c. 2000). Courtesy of Fred's Bakery, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Hebraizations may reflect, and may even reinforce, the extent to which Jews themselves are accepted and affirmed within a regional mainstream. Hence, adoptions of Jewish culture into mass produced and nationally distributed mainstream culture may be an indicator of acceptance and affirmation at the broadest possible level. Such instances do occur in the United States, principally through foodways and wordplay, as when a Jewish culinary tradition (like the bagel), or a Jewish word (like “bagel”) transcends its ethnic border and becomes an integral part of mainstream American life. Upon occasion, however, foodways and wordplay are combined in popular tangible objects.

For example, the Yiddish word *meshuganah* (pronounced meh-*shug*-anah), refers to an individual who is “crazy,” or in the English vernacular, “nuts.” The vernacular plural is *meshuganahs*, which, transformed into “*Meshuganuts*” has become a brand name for party mixes purchased in amusing ethnic canisters, popular with mainstream American consumers as well as American Jews [fig.16].



fig. 16 From soup to nuts—as from matzoh ball candles to Meshuganuts cannisters—tangible Jewish objects enter the mainstream of non-Jewish consumption (c. 2000).
Courtesy of The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore

From soup to nuts—as from matzoh ball soup lunches (and matzoh ball soup candles, as seen here), to canisters of Meshuganuts—some tangible objects in Jewish popular culture have entered the mainstream of non-Jewish consumption, thereby contributing to the tangible Hebraization of America.

The word “tchotchke,” in connection with the tangible objects it defines, is a good example of this phenomenon. In today’s vernacular English, the term has not only entered the mainstream to signify popular, inexpensive, mass produced objects, but it is also applied to every religious, national and ethnic variety of them, e.g., “Catholic tchotchkes,” “Canadian tchotchkes,” and “African-American tchotchkes.” As is generally recognized, American advertising is one particular vehicle of communication which not only speaks to, but also draws from—and therefore reflects—the spirit and mentality of mainstream America. Hence, the nationally distributed ad seen here, itself a popular collectors’ item traded on the

Internet, reflects a Hebraization of America at the national, and therefore the most profound, level. It performs this function by portraying an imported product called “Absolut Vodka” as something easily affordable, familiar and of “absolute” or thoroughly American appeal, [Lewis 1996: 4] and does so in direct association with an object which already enjoys that status: an absolutely classic curio, which is to say, an “Absolut Tchotchke.” The association is signified twice in this case, first by a classic type of American curio; second, by the Yiddish word that has become its absolute, or classic, American referent: “tchotchke” [fig.17].



fig. 17 An imported product is made absolutely appealing and classically “American” in association with a classic type of curio, and its popular American signifier, the Yiddish work “tchotchke” (c. 2000). Courtesy of Absolut Vodka, Stockholm, Sweden

Notably, the foreign word (like the familiar curio) is in widespread, popular use; therefore, while the word retains its ethnic distinction, it is not (or is no longer) objectionably foreign. By extension, the community which introduced the word also retains its ethnic distinction, and is also not (or is no longer) objectionably foreign—an indication of the extent to which the modern Jewish community is accepted and affirmed by the broader American mainstream; precisely the acceptance and affirmation sought for the product by astute American advertisers.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, marshaling symbols to create an ethnic boundary is essential to the survival of an ethnic community, and in tangible form, these symbols

are not limited to traditional folk, liturgical or ceremonial objects. Like items in traditional culture, inexpensive, mass produced objects perform essential social functions for the body of consumers who constitute their market. Tchotchkes, for example, construct, impart and reinforce the cultural boundaries required for survival as an ethnic entity. They reflect shared values and social changes within the collective, and can effect social change by leveling social criticism. They are unifying, democratizing agents, transcending class distinctions and generation gaps, and creating common clay with other community members. They also serve as barometers of ethnic viability and of mainstream sentiment, indicating the extent to which an ethnic entity is internalized by, or remains foreign to, the broader mainstream culture. Therefore, inexpensive, mass-produced tchotchkes may be seen as Jewish popular culture in tangible form, prized by those who mass consume them, for intrinsic social functions that far exceed their material worth.

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