

ENGLISH ABSTRACTS

RABBINIC TALES IN THE ISRAEL FOLKTALE ARCHIVES: HOLY MEN AND TRICKSTERS

Dina Stein

The Israel Folktale Archives (IFA) holds more than 24,000 tales, only 200 of which revolve round a rabbinic figure (of Late Antiquity). Half of these tales are hagiographic narratives about Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (Rashbi) and Rabbi Meir, two characters who are associated with religious practices in the present, because their graves are pilgrimage sites. These tales tell of miraculous interventions of the saintly figures in modern times. Other rabbinic figures appear in the rest of the corpus, around 100 tales. By far the most notable figure in these stories is Rabbi Akiva. Unlike the hagiographic tales about Rashbi and Rabbi Meir, the stories about Rabbi Akiva take place in the distant rabbinic past. Furthermore, they reflect a curious selection, when compared with traditions recorded both in the rabbinic sources themselves and in later compilations. Here Rabbi Akiva is presented as a trickster-like figure or is associated with trickster-like discourse. The article associates these stories about Rabbi Akiva with a recurring tale-type – AT 759 (God's Justice Vindicated) and offers a generative-poetic account for his prominence in the IFA rabbinic tales, based on Umberto Eco's semiotic model of Cult Movies. It also suggests possible reasons for the association of Rabbi Akiva, and in fact most of the other rabbinic figures in the IFA tales, with trickster-like discourse. One such reason relates to the power embedded in trickster-like discourse as it reflects on regulated cultural categories and shuffles them, if only momentarily. The power of this discourse lies in its taking an ambivalent, marginal, and thus subversive position with regard to the hegemonic center. Moreover, while the trickster rabbis are placed in the ancient past, they possibly epitomize the social and political drama surrounding the establishment of the archival project in the early years of the state. By depicting the rabbis as subversive figures, the story-tellers have been expressing their own attitude toward the hegemonic center. The trickster-like corpus of rabbinic characters (excluding saintly figures like Rashbi and Rabbi Meir), whose narrative-space points to a distant past, may thus be seen as epitomizing the social-political drama of the archival project itself, in the nascent days of the state.