In Search of the Present: Synagogue Ethnography

Samuel Heilman

The year was 1911, and European Jewry was going through profound changes, as a result of the twin forces of political emancipation and intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Writing that year, Emile Durkheim, the French Jew turned sociologist, suggested: "the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born." To natives and observers alike, the familiar milieu of Ashkenazic Jewry was becoming transformed and much that had once been taken for granted and common was becoming rare. Amid all this turmoil a Yiddish playwright and folklorist whose name was Shlomo Rapaport but who was better known by his *nom de plume,* S. An-Ski (under which he wrote the famous play, "The Dybbuk"), set out on an expedition financed by Baron Horace Guenzburg to observe and document life and culture in the Jewish communities of Volhynia and Podolia. These relatively insulated areas, An-Ski and his fellow explorers believed, were places where something of the pristine and genuine character of Eastern European Jewry could still be discovered. From 1911 until 1914, they travelled—collecting, sifting, cataloguing and marvelling at the complexity of Jewish culture. Theirs was at best a "salvage ethnography," an effort to document a world that was already changing faster than the people observing it could describe it.

They asked about the history of communities, about local customs, occupations, sayings and folktales. They collected tunes, gossip, legends, recipes, census statistics, photos, and even unpublished manuscripts and diaries. They asked people to describe how their synagogues looked and what went on inside them. They asked them to talk about intermarriage and relations with non-Jews. And they asked for descriptions and characterizations of circumcision, bar-mitzva, wedding and burial ceremonies.

Listen to a recollection from one of the members of the expedition of how it was:

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> Each day we went to *daven* in another *makom koydesh,* to become familiar with the worshippers. After davenen, the worshippers surrounded us and asked questions. An-Ski answered and told stories of the big city, getting himself access to a bit of news and in the end inviting the elders of the shul to his hotel. And by a glass of tea, and more commonly with a drink, with a bite of bagel, An-Ski began asking questions. And the people gladly answered him and told their stories—and we transcribed it to paper. (from: Avraham Rechtman, *Yiddishe Etnografia un Folklor,* YIVO Buenos Aires, 1958, p. 37)

Everywhere the An-Ski expeditions went, they not only collected valuable information about Jewish communities and life; they also infused the people they met with a sense of their own cultural worth. The subjects of their observations in turn became participants in the collection. They were natives who learned to look at themselves and to detail the content and meaning of their lives. The people being observed, like the observers, came to realize that, to quote anthropologist Margaret Mead:

> Human cultures are the most distinctive creations of human beings, drawing as they do not only upon the special contributions of the singularly gifted, but upon the imagination, explicit and implicit, of every man, woman and child who live within them, and through them, and who, each generation, remodel the traditions which they received from their cultural ancestors. But although human cultures are the most distinctive creations of the human, they are also the most fragile, for they live primarily in the habituated beings of living persons. Like a dance, for which the music and the choreography have never been written down, a great part of any human culture is lost to humanity when the group which has carried it, devotedly, in every word and gesture, is dispersed, or destroyed, or forsakes the traditional ways for ways that are new.

So persuaded was An-Ski about the importance of this sort of a record that in 1919, shortly before his death, when Europe and its Jews, like everyone else on the continent, were trying to recover from world war and revolution, when the outside world was rushing in to change the old Jewish ways, he founded the Jewish Ethnographic Society whose goal was to continue to collect artifacts and information about Jewish life and culture.

We now know that European Jewry had very little time left, and while few if any could foresee the fire storm which would destroy Jewish life, many had a sense that for whatever reason life would very soon never again be the same. They collected as if obsessed. During the twenties, the Ethnographic Society, under the direction of Dr. Max Weinreich of the YIVO Institute in Vilna, sent out public calls for information. Ads were published in Yiddish or Russian or Polish: posters were hung, and letters went out to the Jews in Lithuania, Poland, White Russia and throughout Jewish eastern Europe asking for answers to a series of specific questions like those asked by An-Ski. No holy day or festival could pass without a call from the Ethnographic Society.

The ads explained: "We ask you to write everything, even the smallest detail you notice." There were for them details but no trifles involved in

the documentation of Jewish life. Everything counted. Everything was precious—from the mundane to the exotic, from the everyday to the unique.

On the High Holy Days they asked, for example, for descriptions of customs associated with *Selichot* time and the days preceding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They wanted to know: who sends New Year's greetings to whom, what could be recounted about cantors and their behavior at this time of year, how the synagogue was decorated and were there any special lights kindled there, whether or not there were any alterations or special features of the services, what went on during the blowing of the shofar, how did people greet one another in the synagogue on those days, was the mantle on the Torah scroll changed on those days and so on. On Sukkot and Simchat Torah they would ask questions about the customs surrounding the building and dismantling of the Sukkah or the nature of celebration in the community. On all holy days they asked about special holy day foods prepared and eaten. And of course at Passover time they asked about a myriad of details.

The answers flowed in, and so did the questions. Plain people from everywhere wanted further guidance on what and how to collect. They sent postcards and letters with specific technical questions and general requests for further guidance in their collection efforts. The Society published brief checklists and later a booklet in Yiddish (which was the most common language among their collectors) entitled: "What is Ethnography?" The central principle in it, as it was for the commission, was simply: "The Tradition is holy." This was not a divine holiness; it was a holiness born of a respect for the treasure of human creativity.

These people understood that, as anthropologist A. L. Kroeber has put it, "it is with writing that history can be recorded," and that by writing about and detailing their local customs, beliefs, ideals, achievements and practices, they were contributing to history and preserving their culture. This was what they were contributing to the history of the Jews and indeed of the world.

What Is Ethnography?

Ethnography, as this sort of precise description is called, primarily portrays and documents conditions of the moment, capturing the present in the depth and fullness of its life, on behalf of the future. Put together over time, ethnographic descriptions record change while documenting patterns of culture. But such efforts are not simply a bequest for future generations for as I have already suggested the very act of looking at oneself through the prism of historical and social consciousness makes one different, sensitized to the value and meaning of the life being lived. A view of the present from the perspective of the future gives that present a preciousness and integrity it all too often lacks. That is what makes doing ethnography so compelling.

Little remains of those materials that An-Ski and later the YIVO sponsored

Jewish Ethnographic Society collected. The Nazis destroyed much and some is trapped inside the Soviet Union. What little was saved was that which the American Army retrieved from the Nazis and what was to have been their museum of a dead Jewish culture and what the North and South American branches of YIVO managed to collect. Then too, survivors have written *Yizkr-bikhr* (memory books) which impressionistically recreate the Jewish world they once inhabited.

Reading through the fragments that remain, one gets an awe-inspiring feeling about the world that was. Holding the cards and letters that remain—some were extensive documents, others short notes detailing one or another practice or event—gives a reader a chance to overcome the Holocaust and step back into and retrieve the past. Reading the directions which remain for collectors and the calls and ads, fires the imagination and allows one to conceive of what it was like to look at Jewish culture and try to capture it. And, above all else, it makes one think about the present.

The Jewish communities An-Ski and the YIVO sought to document are now gone and only memories. But the method approach of those expeditions—to say nothing of their aims—need not be. They can and should be brought back to life.

We in America live today in the single largest Jewish settlement on earth. And we live in it against the backdrop of an awful history which should make us especially aware of the fragility of culture. Yet we know more about Jewish life as it once was in Minsk and Pinsk, Vilna and Krakow, Frankfurt and Berlin or the Shtetls of Anatevka and Visoky Dvor than we know about Chicago and Boston, New York and Detroit, Harrisburg, Silver Spring or Miami Beach. There is surely a great deal that ties these places together in the general fabric of American Jewry, and similarly there are undoubtedly significant and real elements that differentiate them and constitute the distinctiveness of each.

To be sure, American Jews are learning about their statistics. The Federations and Jewish Community Councils, among others, have by now learned the importance of surveying Jewish numbers and are now likewise examining Jewish opinions and attitudes. All that is valuable. There is, however, a need for ethnographies too—descriptions of the blood and tissue of Jewish life and culture. What is taken for granted about everyday Jewish life, its institutions, practices, customs, stories and folk life is in fact a treasure that needs to be preserved. No An-Ski expedition exists today. The YIVO is still sifting through the materials which detail the past. But almost no one seems to be collecting anymore. The challenge and responsibility of collecting information about contemporary American Jewish life now rests therefore upon the contemporary Jewish community.

What Is To Be Done?

The insulated and relatively uniform shtetls and Jewish communities of the past are, with the exception of certain precincts of Orthodoxy, by and

large a thing of the past. Even those who actively identify themselves as Jews live lives situated in modernity, and as such live a kind of double existence—part American and part Jewish. This has had many repercussions for Jewish life and culture. Among these has been the special emphasis that American Jews have placed on the synagogue. In a sense the synagogue has become the last ghetto, one of the remaining places where Jews interact with no one other than their fellow Jews. It is, for some, what makes the synagogue "*haymish*," a setting that reminds one of home. For others, perhaps a majority of those who attend with any sort of regularity, the synagogue has in fact become *the* Jewish community. Accordingly, if we are to take up the unfinished task of documenting and fleshing out Jewish life and culture, we shall have to pay the same attention to synagogue life that our forbears once devoted to Jewish community life. We shall ask many of the same questions they asked and get today's answers.

One begins with a recognition of the importance of the task. Recognizing that "tradition" is not always identical with sacred tradition but can include folkways and customs that have gained a respectbaility and import by virtue of their survival, one must too view American Jewish synagogue life as "holy," and as such seek to capture every detail, every nuance of its character. There is a need to know not only what people do and how they do it, but also what they feel and understand about what they are doing. If we are participants ourselves, we can describe our own actions and motives. And, as participants, we can be better observers, for our fellow Jews will more easily be able to tell us what they mean by their actions than they could or would explain it to strangers. Moreover, as insiders, we know where and when to look for the action.

Some Suggestions

This does not mean that everyone will begin running around with pad and pen jotting down all he or she sees or that cameras will become as ubiquitous as *tallis* bags. It does mean that some descriptions will be composed and some photos, films or videos will be made. It means that bulletins, yearbooks or newsletters will be collected, at least one copy of all correspondence coming out of the synagogue will be saved, and that some people will take on the responsibility of collecting. It means that, in tandem with professional anthropologists and ethnographers, lay people will begin to document Jewish life as it is now being lived. It means that some people will try to map out social networks in the synagogue, showing who is friends with whom and how people are connected to one another so that a clearer understanding of the group character of the community will emerge. It means, in brief, that from now on we shall begin to collect and discover the substance of Jewish material, social and spiritual culture.

These three foci of ethnography often impinge on one another. Thus, a description of the synagogue building design or the props in it must also say something about how people use the space and the props, how these

effect social and spiritual culture. To learn for example, that all the strangers and guests in the congregation sit in, say, the first row or that a special section of the library is set aside for a circle of older people who regularly review some Jewish text there, or that members normally mark special occasions in their lives by donating prayer books and Bibles to the synagogue tells us at once about the material culture (the seats, the library, the books) and social and spiritual life (that outsiders are set apart, the libraries are used for religious duties, or that personal experiences can be reflected through the medium of sacred books).

Consider material culture for a moment. Synagogues are in a sense living museums. They are places where people interact with space and sacred articles in special ways. While there are some standard features of all synagogues—a holy ark, Torah scrolls, books, seats, lecterns and the like—there sre also important ways in which synagogues differ from one another. We know this is true, but we do not know how true it is. We need to know what synagogues look like, what is inside them, how are things and space used, what changes have been made in the physical plant and *why*. We want to discover the aesthetic which underlies the American synagogue. Today when we look at the models, drawings or photos of the Eastern European wooden synagogues or the large edifices in the cities, we realize that there was an aesthetic and guiding principle to them. When American synagogues in neighborhoods that have long since changed are about to be torn down we suddenly realize the value and meaning of the building. Why wait so long? Look at the buildings now, from the magnificent palaces of prayer to the humbler structures. These reflect the physical side of American Jewry and its aesthetic.

Similarly, the insides ot the building matter. The canopy that was specially commissioned, the windows, the social hall, the *bimah,* the memorial tablets, the objects placed in the showcases in the corridors, how the sacred objects are arrayed or displayed, perhaps the special *ner tamid,* the silver plates on the Torah scrolls, the *havdala* sets, the curtains on the ark—both those used on special occasions and those used more regularly. Synagogues are community centers and as such they are often places where information about community life and concerns are passed on. A scan of the bulletin boards can often reveal a great deal about what is on the community's mind. Bookcases can provide evidence of what books are possessed and which are used. These and other items that make up the inside must be captured, by either photos or descriptions. And undoubtedly, many of the items have stories which go with them: how they were acquired, perhaps how they once started a quarrel, why something old is preferred to something new and so on.

An important part of the material culture inside the synagogue concerns clothing—both ritual (the robes, the sacred garb) and profane. What do the worshippers look like? Where can one discover continuity and where change? In reviewing old records of bygone congregations, people are often most fascinated by the appearance of our Jewish forbears. We are no less

fascinating. Look at pictures and or compose descriptions of the Jews in your congregation. Can people be identified by what they wear to Sabbath services, for example? Does a woolen *tallis* differentiate one man from another? Are there innovations in the old props that reflect our own times and culture? How do strangers walk into the services and how do regulars do so? Give an insider's understanding to everyone. Recreate your picture of synagogue life for others.

What food gets brought into the synagogue? We know of the herring salads and chopped liver sculptures; they have made it into American folk culture. All those brotherhood breakfasts and morning minyan kiddushes that are at once extensions of a tradition rooted in the past and recreations reflecting the present—what are they like? But there is more. Surely, as insiders we all know how to rate a Jewish menu—a big bar-mitzva must be reflected gastronomically. But how and with what? These may be details, but they are not trifles for they are the threads of the tapestry of our material culture. Always, in describing the material, we must remember that if what is there is lost, we who failed to record its life will be responsible.

Consider next social and spiritual culture. There is perhaps nothing whose importance people commonly dismiss as much as gossip. What one person learns about another may at once seem vitally important to the individuals involved while notably trivial from the point of view of history. But the fact is that by and large most people learn what is expected and appropriate community behavior and norms not by virtue of some written rules and regulations but by means of gossip. Through it they find out what someone has done that is laudable and what is condemnable. Today's gossip is, in a very real way, the contemporary counterpart of yesterday's folktales. We no longer tell stories about fictional characters from which homilies and moral lessons are to be learned. We talk instead about real people. The lessons, however, remain universal and unchanging. A competent reading of gossip can thus be invaluable for ethnographers in finding out how people are supposed to and how in fact they do act. Describe what it is that most people are interested in talking about. The usher who shows people into the synagogue on Sabbath mornings always exchanges some news and gossip with those who enter—what sorts of things are talked about? And what sorts of things are never talked about? That too tells something about the character of the congregation. No one is more competent at gossip than those who give and receive it.

Congregations spend a lot of time and energy on the matter of attendance at various events in the synagogue. For some the attendance at the daily *minyan* is the issue. For others it is the turn-out for Friday night services or Saturday mornings. For some it is the attendance at banquets or at lectures that count, and so on. Knowing who and how many come out and on what occasions is to know something about what synagogue members consider important. Such a simple fact as attendance figures can be enormously revealing, as can knowing the calendar of events.

In line with this, most insiders have a good idea of what sorts of activities will succeed—raffles or bazaars, carnivals or lectures—and when they are best held—Friday night or Sunday morning, before Passover or after it, and so on. This knowledge too serves as a part of documenting social life.

Every synagogue has its serious and light-hearted moments. There are some standards on this: high holy days, for example, tend to be serious; Simchat Torah and Purim light-hearted. But there are variations. Thus, for example, in one synagogue a five minute circle dance constitutes merriment, while in another it requires a run into the streets with Torah scrolls or costumes. To know what the definitions of the situation are in a particular synagogue is to learn something special about the ways the community and its congregants deal with emotion, ritual and the spiritual calendar of Jewish life.

In America we are obsessed with sex and youth. Our synagogues cannot help but reflect that. How men are treated differently from women and young from old are questions that need to be answered. What special organizations do each of these groups have? Are women officers of the congregation? Are children? Who holds power? How is that power defined? How is it given or taken away? These are matters of no small import in a synagogue, and many have broken up over just such issues.

Tension and the way it is handled is of no small consequence for synagogue life. We know it is there if only by virtue of the fact that many if not most American synagogues were organized as breakaways from older synagogues. The old joke that every Jew has to found at least two synagogues—one he attends and one he refuses to attend—is rather closer to than farther from the truth. But how close is it? Only descriptions by insiders of how conflict and tension is generated and handled can give a glimpse of the truth.

Songs. When people come to a synagogue they not only come to worship or study or simply get together. Sometimes they also come to sing. The *nigunnim,* the tunes associated with certain prayers, the Jewish melodies that have become popular to dance to or sing as festive gatherings are mirrors of culture. They are as close as the contemporary synagogue comes to having folktunes. We need recordings. How, for example, does the *kedusha* prayer get chanted? Are there special tunes that the local cantor has composed for the prayers?

Liturgy is a complex process, part tradition and part interpretation. American Jews, like their forbears have on occasion found a need to tinker with liturgy. To know what prayers have been changed and which remain the same as before is to know something about the character of Jewish devotion. What do the people say and what do they skip in the liturgy? And what, if anything, do they add and why?

Names are perhaps the clearest way that we identify ourselves. But names, especially nicknames can also detail a relationship to the community. In the past Jews had nicknames like Moshe Aaron the Shul-Klapper (who

was the one who called worshippers to the synagogue to pray) or Sarah the Rebbetzin. Are there counterparts today? What are they?

The list is nearly endless and so I shall stop here. If even some of the questions raised here are answered, we shall have increased our knowledge of American synagogue life by one hundred percent.

The Pilot Effort

In order to discover whether or not lay people would respond to a new ethnographic expedition and be willing and able to participate in a program of collection and description of American synagogue life, I traveled to several communities. At each synagogue, I addressed the congregation and explained to them much of what I have said here. Subsequently, I held parlor meetings and smaller gatherings with those who were interested and willing to volunteer for the ethnography project. In each place, the initial responses were positive. The thought of examining their own way of synagogue life was appealing to most people.

In each synagogue a small steering committee with a chair or co-chairs was set up. These committees would then act as collecting agents. They collected documents (flyers, announcements, synagogue bulletins, letters, photos, etc.) as well as first-person accounts or descriptions of various aspects of synagogue life. Wherever there were problems or questions, I was available to help. For the most part, however, the committees and participants were able to handle the project quite well on their own.

The results, although only preliminary, were overwhelming. To be sure, some communities had a harder time starting up than others. But the project is still in its early stages and no one has given up.

Much of what came in does not lend itself to display before a large audience. It is rather made up of materials which when put together weave a tapestry of synagogue life which is at once rich and varied. Reading through the materials, one can experience some of the same feelings one gets when reviewing the An-Ski and YIVO archives. However, rather than having an awe-inspiring feeling about the world that *was*, one gets that feeling about the world that *is*.

Comparing what I was reading about contemporary, ongoing synagogue life, I was able to look at the present with some of the perspective usually reserved only for the past—one which endowed the presence with the same sort of value normally given to the past. I could get a sense of the distinctive features of contemporary synagogue life, how people live within them and through them; and how each generation extends or remodels the traditions which they received from their cultural ancestors. Reading the first person accounts or looking at the photos, one sees how the process of collecting the information infused the participants with a sense of their own cultural worth, how by writing about and detailing their local customs, beliefs ideals and practices, the participants were contributing to history and preserving their culture. Most especially, however, one realizes how

the very act of looking at oneself through the prism of historical and social consciousness makes one different, sensitized to the value and meaning of the life being lived. Consider some examples.

A woman writes an account, entitled: "The Morning Minyon—A Woman's Perspective." In it, among other things, she writes: "One of the 'regulars' at the Beth El Morning Minyon commented, 'I don't need a country club; I have the Morning Minyon!" He touched a responsive chord in all of us because through the years we have shared each other's happy events as well as sadnesses. As a result of 'davening' together every morning, we share a deep sense of belonging and camaraderie. . . . One woman who began attending when her husband died said she appreciates knowing there are so many people who really care if she is up and around each morning."

Another account mentions: "I work in a very Gentile environment and to me [synagogue] services are a way of bringing me back 'to the fold' and making my Jewishness come to the forefront. Being at services is attaching oneself to the past. . . ."

Yet another account describing summer synagoge life notes: "Summer Shabbat morning services are run totally by lay people. . . . All roles change from week to week. There are no Bnai Mitzvah, only Shabbat regulars. Generally, services are thirty minutes shorter. Many congregants look forward to these more informal services shared mostly by those who truly enjoy being together for Shabbat."

There is much much more; these are simply single frames of a longer more complex film in which the synagogue life people live comes to life.

Further glimpse of the ethnographic endeavor can be offered through a kind of quick survey of some visual aspects of American synagogue life. Such a survey, carried on by means of slides, can of course only reveal one dimension of the blood and tissue of life. But, if it does not provide the whole story, it at least offers a beginning.

But how is one to look at such slides? For starters, one observes reflexively. By that I mean, one must view the images as reflections of their time and place, as illustrations of life in a particular context. If that cultural context is one with which one is familiar—of which one is a native—then the observation requires some distance.

One way to achieve such a perspective on the present is to look at it as if one were observing it from the past. Imagining, for example, that we are seeing life not as it is at present being lived but as it once was—as I have already suggested—*gives each image an integrity and preciousness it would* otherwise lack. What is taken-for-granted now, through the perspective of hindsight when the people who lived this way are no longer, becomes fascinating, absorbing and informative. It also makes the observer aware of how much he does not fully know and needs to find out. Why, for example, one style of synagogue architecture develop in 20th century Jewish America and not another? What is the meaning that can be extracted from analysis of those items congregations choose to put in their store show-

cases? Who wears a colored *tallis* and who a silk one? What are the constant customs of the American bat and bar mitzva and how did they evolve? Just what are the roots of the men's club Sunday breakfast and is there anything it has in common with the activities which men used to carry out in synagogues over the ages? What are the constants and what are the variables in the morning minyan? Documentation and description answer questions and raise endless new ones.

Conclusion

As I have already suggested, for Jews life is with people; the community is holy and it has been of no small consequence in keeping our people alive over the generations. We must leave behind a record of our community life—for ourselves, our students, our scholars and our children. The need is clear for an American version of the An-Ski expedition and new Archive of Ethnography, where the cultural wealth that is Jewish synagogue life in America can be stored. Such an archive will serve not only as a most valuable resource for students and scholars examining the character of synagogue life in America, it will also act as a vehicle for giving synagogue communities a consciousness of their own worth. Our failure to so document the previous generations of synagogue life in America is tragic. While there are memories and anecdotes about what the synagogue in America was like in previous generations, as of this moment there exist few systematic accounts of synagogue life in America. We dare not squander the present. I urge you to encourage, stimulate and assist your congregations in the creation of a vital ethnographic record of this fragile reality we call American synagogue life. There is little more precious than the creation of culture. Once created, however, it must be documented.

Franz Kafka once wrote: "The Jews have always produced their joys and their sorrows at almost the same time as the Rashi commentary relating to them. . . ." The accounts of the ethnographer are in a sense the Rashi commentary on culture—or at the very least the "Targum Onkelos."

In one of the accounts from the pilot group of synagogues in the project, a man wrote a letter detailing his recollections of the founding of his synagogue. The last line of that letter stands out in my memory because I think it says it all. He wrote: "There is a lot to be told if anyone wants to listen."