

# Dameta leTamar

Studies in Honor of Tamar Alexander

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# Table of Contents

<b>Yaakov Bentolila</b>	
Cómo se <i>trokan</i> los proverbios	1
<b>David M. Bunis</b>	
On Judezmo Terms for the Proverb and Saying: A Look from Within	11
<b>Paloma Díaz-Mas</b>	
Actitudes de los españoles hacia los sefardíes: descripciones de las costumbres de boda de Marruecos en libros y periódicos publicados en España (1873-1971)	55
<b>Michal Held</b>	
“Ansina pueden dizir loke keren” (This way they can say whatever they wish) – Expressions of Gender in the Personal Narratives of Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) – Speaking Women Storytellers	75
<b>Aviad Moreno</b>	
An Insight into the Course of European-oriented Modernization among Oriental Jewries – the Minute Book of the Junta of Tangier	95
<b>Gérard Nahon</b>	
Les <i>Pëqide-Qushṭa</i> , les Officiers pour la Terre sainte d’Istanbul face aux <i>Āmarkalim</i> , les Surintendants d’Amsterdam, 1827-1828	121
<b>Eliezer Papo</b>	
Iberian Catholic Elements in Bosnian and Moroccan Judeo-Spanish Refraneros	143
<b>Aldina Quintana</b>	
Cuatro fragmentos de otros tantos cuadernos inéditos con recetas de medicina y farmacología sefardíes de la colección de la Genizah del JTS	161
<b>Pilar Romeu</b>	
Aproximación a la filmografía sobre los sefardíes: Apuntes para el estudio de un género en gestación	191

**Ora (Rodrigue) Shwarzwald**

Personal Names, Toponymes, and Gentile Nouns in Ladino  
and Spanish Translations of the Bible

209

**Michael Studemund-Halévy**

Obsessed with the Theater: The Translator and Amateur  
Author Rafael Farin

229

“Ansina pueden dizir loke keren”  
(This way they can say whatever they wish) –  
Expressions of Gender in the Personal Narratives  
of Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) – Speaking Women Storytellers

Michal Held

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For Tamar Alexander, who opened a gate for many Sephardic women’s voices and paved a path for their understanding. Best of luck in the paths to come: “Una puerta se serra, sien se avrin” (when one door closes, a hundred doors open).

**Introduction: Conceptual and Methodological Keys**

The woman’s voice, and the way in which it is expressed and interpreted in the Personal Narrative,<sup>1</sup> has recently received growing attention in Israeli folkloristic research. For example, both Ilana Rosen, focusing on the PN’s of Hungarian female Holocaust survivors,<sup>2</sup> and Nili Arye-Sapir, dealing with the PN’s of women who belonged to the pioneering generations of Zionism and the shaping of Israeli society,<sup>3</sup> aim at deciphering the feminine voice and the messages it carries. Similar concerns are being

1 In short “PN”.

2 See Ilana Rosen, *Sister in Sorrow: Life Histories of Female Holocaust Survivors from Hungary*, translated & edited by Sandy Bloom, Detroit 2008; idem, “Women and Time in the Life Histories of Female Holocaust Survivors of Austro-Hungarian Origins”, *Cadernos de Lingua e Literatura Hebraica*, vol. 4 (2004), pp. 36-48; idem, “Personal Historical Narrative Shaping the Past and Present”, in *European Journal of Jewish Studies*, 3:1 (2009), pp. 103-133.

3 See Nili Arye-Spir, “Collective Messages in the Personal Narrative of Leah Horowitz” [in Hebrew], *Sadan* 6 (2007), pp. 65-80; Nili Arye-Sapir, “A Proverbial Dialogue between

dealt with in the research of written personal narratives (diaries and autobiographies) of Zionist and Israeli women by researchers of literature<sup>4</sup> and of communications.<sup>5</sup> Within the wider context of which these works form a part, the following essay shall ask whether the PN's of Sephardic women stepping out of traditional society and earning acceptance as equal members of modern society may be defined as feminine manifestos, and furthermore, if they may be regarded as a distinctly feminine genre.

Questions such as these are central to the exploration and interpretation of the PN's of the Judeo-Spanish<sup>6</sup>–speaking women storytellers with which this essay is concerned.<sup>7</sup> Created and performed in the linguistic and cultural climate of contemporary Israel, in an ethnic language that is ceasing to exist as an essential communications tool, the narratives evoke the constantly changing process of reconstructing their narrators'<sup>8</sup> understanding of themselves, their lives, and the world. They may be regarded as

a Pioneers' Daughter and her Mother” [in Hebrew], *Massechet* 5 (2006), pp. 69-81; Nili Arye-Sapir and Michal Held, “Queen Esther of the Tel Aviv Purim Carnival – A Personal Narrative in its Cultural Context” [in Hebrew], *Massekhet* 8 (2008), pp. 97-116.

4 See, for example, Tamar Hess, “The Confessions of a Bad Reader: Embodied Selves, Narrative Strategies, and Subversion in Israeli Women's Autobiography”, *Prooftexts*, 27:1 (2007), pp 151-187; Yaffa Berlovitz, ed., *A Wounded Bird: Dora Bader Diary (1933-1937)* [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv 2011.

5 Esther Schely-Newman, *Our Lives Are But Stories: Narratives of Tunisian-Israeli Women*, Detroit 2002.

6 Judeo-Spanish is mainly a Romance language with embedded Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish, and Balkan components. Originating in medieval Spain, it became a widespread Jewish language when the descendants of Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 continued to use it in oral and written form in their newly established communities in the Ottoman Empire and Northern Morocco. The language received various names down the centuries, including the term “Ladino”, which originally referred to the dialect used in the translation of the Bible and other sacred Jewish texts from the sixteenth century on. This dialect differs from the spoken and written language used by Sephardic Jews. The language used in the personal narratives analyzed in this paper is thus referred to as “Judeo-Spanish” (and in short “JS”), and the culture it represents is referred to as “Sephardic”. The term “Ladino” is used only when quoted directly from the storytellers as such.

7 For further information and analysis, see Michal Held, *Let Me Tell You a Story / Ven te kontare: The Personal Narratives of Judeo-Spanish Speaking Storytelling Women, An Interdisciplinary Study* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem 2009.

8 The informants are members of a group of Judeo-Spanish–speaking storytellers: women in their sixties, seventies, and late eighties who since 1986, mainly in Jerusalem, have been meeting once a month for over twenty years to tell each other folk tales in Judeo-Spanish—

identity formation mechanisms, consisting of a fusion of realistic, fictional, and folkloric materials. Their dialogic nature is also central to their definition.

The following analysis shall focus on the way in which Sephardic women conceive themselves while creating their PN in their ethnic language, using the PN as a vehicle for understanding the feminine awareness that is being voiced through it, as well as the other worldviews and values that the narrators (consciously or unconsciously) convey.

Prior to the close reading of the PN's, an organizing phenomenon at work in all of them should be presented. Traditional formalist theories, such as the influential model of Vladimir Propp<sup>9</sup> and his followers in the study of folklore, are based upon an analysis of the internal aspects of folk literature: plot, characters, etc. In the PN, more components, such as material culture and intertextuality, are at work. Looking at several recurring characteristics appearing in the corpus of PN's I studied led to the definition of the "narrative package", which is characteristic of the PN and includes both internal/fictive and external/realistic categories.

The specific narrative packages identified and analyzed in my research of the PN's of Sephardic women storytellers are the following: Story and the storyteller; Loss of a meaningful other; Birth and giving birth; Geographical locations and the movement between them; Womanhood and independence; Match-making and marriage; War and traumatic historical events; Sephardic characteristics/traits (language, culture, ethnicity); Objects of material culture; Food and recipes; Intertextuality; Childhood; Past and present. Each of these packages illuminates the individual and collective messages channeled through the PNs.

Three of these packages were studied in depth: Birth and giving birth – demonstrating how plot is dealt with in the PN; Loss of a meaningful other – demonstrating psychological notions at work in the PN, and intertextuality – demonstrating the way in which

their mother tongue. Many of their folktales were transcribed and published by the group's founder, Matilda Koen-Sarano, born in Milan, Italy, in 1939. The other storytellers who contributed to the research are (in alphabetical order of their last names) Ester Levi, born in Jerusalem in 1920; Sol Maymaran, born in Jerusalem in 1915, died in Jerusalem in 2000; Miriam Reymond, born in Milan, Italy, in 1945, Malka Simha, born in Seres, Greece, in 1914, died in Jerusalem in 2010; Levana Sasson, born in Jerusalem in 1942; and Ester Ventura, born in Izmir, Turkey, in 1930, died in Jerusalem in 2014.

9 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Laurence Scott, trans. Louis A. Wagner, Austin 1968.

“*Ansina pueden dizir loke keren*”

different textual materials (especially folktales, proverbs, and idio-proverbs)<sup>10</sup> are interwoven and utilized in the PN. The following discussion focuses on questions of gender expressed through two relevant narrative packages: Birth and giving birth, and Match-making and Marriage.

## 1. The Feminine Voice and the Question of Gender

Traditional Jewish society differentiates between female and male folkloristic and canonic genres and performances: roughly, women deliver babies, while men commit the act of circumcision; women cook while men say the blessing over the food; women lament for the dead, while men study the Torah in their memory. Studies of the role of women in the different fields of folklore in many human societies support the understanding that it is characterized by the duties that are associated with the woman in the framework of the family and the working cycles in which she functions.<sup>11</sup>

It is in this context that we should ask ourselves whether the narratives that this essay sets out to explore may be defined as a feminine genre. Folklore genre scholarship, especially that which is concerned with the PN, acknowledges the fact that genres are not neutral classification systems, but part of the politics of interpretation in which meaning and the authority to propose and ascribe categories is contested.<sup>12</sup> In most cases, the PN of a man or a woman may be defined as masculine or feminine respectively, as aspects of gender often occupy a central place in the identity of the individual who creates it.

Ilana Rosen explains the mechanism enabling the PN's of Jewish women to become a powerful tool for feminine identity formation:

Men tend to discuss communal tradition, especially its religious components, whereas women tend to private discourse, which enables them to tell their own experiences. Men present the collective, whereas women present the personal,

10 Short phrases created by the narrators that follow the traditional characteristics of proverbs. For detailed definition and analysis see Note 7, pp. 198-218.

11 See, for example, Linda Degh, *Narrative in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration*, Helsinki 1995, pp. 62-69.

12 See Amy Shuman, “Gender and Genre”, in *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore*, ed. Susan Tower Hollis et al., Chicago 1993, p. 71.

men express authority and norm, whereas women describe specific events and their affective impression upon their consciousness. Men describe their bygone world in its glory, whereas women recount its destruction.<sup>13</sup>

To connect these observations to our corpus, we should point out that women have rarely played an active public role in the communities that form the Sephardic narrators' social background. Their PN's compensate for this social situation enabling them to construct a feminine identity while illuminating questions such as womanhood and independence, match-making and married life, birth and birth giving. On another hermeneutic level, the storytellers use the PN's to negotiate and understand the place that their individual identity occupies within their collective identity and memory.

Moreover, the identification of the PN's we are looking at as a feminine genre derives from the fact that the women who created them were active members of an exclusively feminine storytelling group. The definition of the group as a territory inaccessible to men influences the narrators' tendency to conceive their traditional folktales (and indirectly their PN's too) as feminine. An example of this conception is found in the PN of Matilda Koen-Sarano:

Michal: Porke ay solamente mujeres en el *hug*?

Matilda: Esto es mejor. Mucho mejor. Porke ansina pueden dizir loke keren. I no te digo loke sale afuera! De mil kolores, de mil kozas! Porke son viejas, somos viejas, no mos emporta nada. No tenemos *busha*, komo se dize... I despues, los ombres no vienen a estas kozas. Ke ombre vas a traer? Traimos un musafir, ma no es ke tenemos ombres ke partisipan en esto. Los ombres, a los ombres no les va a agradar... I los ombres kontan kuentos mui diferentes ke las mujeres. No son los mizmos kuentos. Muchos kuentos de mujeres les paresen patranyas a los ombres: todos los kuentos de *mazal*, todas las konsejas, de reyes, de bodas i esto todo. Para los ombres no son emportantes. Eyos tienen kuentos morales, kuentos del *Me'am Loez*, kuentos del *kal*, kuentos de... si. Mi padre kontava kuentos de, de... Kere dizir kuentos de estados, de reyes kon kozas de polotika, estas kozas kontava. Ma no, no estos kuentos. Estos son kuentos de otra manera.

(Michal: Why are there only women in the group?)

Matilda: This is better, much better ... because this way they can say whatever they wish. And I can't tell you what comes out! In thousands of colors! Thousands

13 See Note 2, item 2, p. 4.

“*Ansina pueden dizir loke keren*”

of things! Because they are old, we are old ladies, we don't care about anything. We have no shame, as they say. And men don't come to these sorts of things. What man will you bring? We brought a [male] visitor, but it doesn't mean that we have men who participate in this [regularly.] Men are not going to like this... And men tell stories that are different than the ones women tell. These are not the same stories. Many women's stories seem to men like lies: all those stories of luck, the folktales about kings, weddings etc. They are not important for men. They have their moral tales; tales from the *Me'am Loez*, stories from the synagogue, stories... yes. My father used to tell stories of, of... of estates, of kings with political things. This sort of things he used to tell. But no, no, these are other kinds of stories).

Another example of the conception of the group as a feminine territory is given by Ester Levi, an active participant in the storytellers' activities since it was founded:

Ester: Ombres no ay ande mozos.

Michal: Porke? Ay kuentos de mujeres i kuentos de ombres?

Ester: El kuento ke kotni yo de la *zona* no es ermozo de kontar al lado de ombres. Ya lo oites?

Michal: Si. Son diferentes, los kuentos de los ombres.

Zehava: Porke no ay ombres? Es *meanyen*.

Ester: Ay, mira, todas son bivdas a lo mas. Muchas bivdas vienen, muchas...

(Ester: There are no men with us [in the group].)

Michal: Why? Are there tales of women and tales of men?

Ester: The tale I told about the whore, it is not nice to tell it next to men. Did you hear that tale?

Michal: Yes. Are men's tales different than women's?

Zehava: But why are there no men [in the group]? It is interesting.

Ester: Look, they [we] are all widows. Most [of us]. Many widows come, many ...)

Tamar Alexander-Frizer explained the importance of inter-feminine folktales:

The existence of stories about women in women's circles proves that the audience of women [...] needs an art that reflects an internal group point of view and reinforces it. In this case, the common dominator of the group is gender.<sup>14</sup>

14 Tamar Alexander-Frizer, *The Heart Is a Mirror: The Sephardic Folktale*, translated by Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum, Detroit c2008, p. 376.

Borrowing her insight for the understanding of the PN, we can see how the views expressed by Matilda and Ester convey the fact that gender is a central factor in the formation and manifestation of the self and the collective identity of the women whose PN's were addressed to me, a woman myself, within a feminine network.

Thus, the PN's with which we are concerned may be defined as a feminine, and I shall now try to decipher the feminine voice that is heard through them. According to the Talmudic proverb, "Out of ten measures of talking that were brought down to the world, women took nine" (Tractate Kiddushin 49a). Based on a male dominance, the traditional Jewish canon de-legitimizes the right of women to express themselves in elevated contexts, regarding their speech as useless conversation. Rachel Elior studied a wide range of traditional Jewish texts in which the voice of women had been muted.<sup>15</sup> Missing in her model is folk literature, which enables women to express themselves in a relatively free and uncensored way outside the cultural canon. According to Galit Hasan-Rokem, the folk narrative is a creative field that allows a co-existence of a multitude of voices, including those of women. She goes on to claim that the folk narrative is a dialogue between paternalistic views and those that undermine them within the boundaries of the same text.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the PN's explored here are hermeneutic tools for representing reality through a set of feminine voices and consciousness.

## 2. Match-Making and Marriage

Exploring womanhood in the PN's of the Sephardic storytellers I analyzed evokes a situation more complex than that of liberating the woman's voice. The complexity may be demonstrated through the narrators' interpretation of issues such as female independence, match-making and marriage. Matilda Koen-Sarano recalls her refusal to give up her wish to study literature at the university, when her mother, portrayed

15 See Rachel Elior, "'Present but Absent', 'Still Life' and 'A Pretty Maiden who has No Eyes': On the presence and absence of women in the Hebrew Language, in Jewish Culture and in Israeli life", in *Streams into the Sea: Studies in Jewish Culture and Its Context, Dedicated to Felix Posen*, eds. E. Reiner and R. Livneh-Freudenthal, Tel Aviv 2001, pp. 191-211.

16 Galit Hasan-Rokem, *The Web of Life – Folklore in Rabbinic Literature: The Palestinian Aggadic Midrash Eikha Rabba* [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv 1996, pp. 121-123.

*“Ansina pueden dizir loke keren”*

in her PN as the more traditional female character, expected her to acquire a practical profession or terminate her studies altogether and get married:

I kuando ‘skapi el liseo, mi mama keria ke vo a estudiar alguna koza de komersial. Porke no somos rikos, porke, porke. Ma yo kijo estudiar literatura, estudios umanitikos, i me fui yo i me ‘skrivi a los umanistikos malgrado ke mi madre no kijiera. Kijo una koza fasil para lavorar. Ma yo no entyendo d’estas kozas komersyalas. Kiji estudiar literatura i latino, sovre todo latino, mucho latino. I linguas. I me ‘skrivi a linguas. No, no izi kuento... Kuando ‘skapi el liseo me ‘skrivi al universidad. [Kuando] Aaron vino a Milano i la prima vez ke mos konosimos, le tomo un anyo i medio para konversarme a mi, porke no tenia la mas chika entensyon de kazarme. Yo keria ‘studiar”.

(And when I finished high school, my mother wanted me to study something commercial. Because we are not rich, because, because. But I wanted to study literature, humanistic studies. And I went and registered myself for the humanities despite of what my mother wanted. She wanted something easy that would enable me to work. But I don’t understand these commercial things. I wanted to study literature and Latin, more than anything Latin, lots of Latin, and languages, and I registered myself for languages. I didn’t make a story [=a big deal] ... When I finished high school I registered for university. [When] Aaron came to Milan and the first time we knew each other, it took him a year and a half to convince me [to marry him], because I didn’t have the slightest intention to get married. I wanted to study).

Surprisingly, the meeting with her future husband is the only event that the same narrator who insists on pursuing her higher education and not giving it up for married life refers to as “a story” in its own right when reconstructing it in her PN: “Te kero dizir de la primera vez ke lo vidi [a Aaron], porke esto es un kuento, si? (I want to tell you [about] the first time that I saw him, because this is a story, yes?) The importance of meeting the potential husband and raising a family justifies the choice Matilda eventually made to give up her studies for marriage.

Female independence and Match-Making and Marriage are two contradictory narrative packages that eventually balance in Matilda’s PN, as they do in the narratives created by some of the other members of the storytellers’ group she leads. The conglomerate of these narrative packages employed in the PN of Malka Simha evokes a tension between social attempts to make a match for marriage for the narrator and her wish to take control of her life. She addresses the dilemma at an early stage of her narrative:

Vino una tia mia, una ermana de mi mama, en Gresia, para vijitarnos despues de esta desgrasia [de la muerte de mi ermano]. I kijo ke me fuera kon eya a Stambol [...] Teniamos un vizino, un manseviko ke me keria bien [...] vino un dia el padre, esta diziendo a mi padre: ‘Yo keria a Rejin, la dieras para mi ijo.’ ‘Avlare kon eya.’ Yo, en entandant, prometia a mi tia ke me vo a Stambol. Ijika, kere trokamiento! Dishe ‘Me kero ir a Stambol!’ [...] Tenia un tio. Era kunyado de mi papa [...] lo yamimos una noche, ke me [???] el pasaporto. O me vo o me kedo es otra koza. (An aunt, my mother’s sister, came to Greece to visit us after this disaster [of my brother’s death]. And she wanted me to go with her to Istanbul. In Greece, we had a neighbor. A young guy who wanted me very much [...] One day the [=his] father came, saying to my father: ‘I want Rejin, give her for my son’. ‘I shall speak to her’. I, while waiting, promised my aunt that I would go to Istanbul. A young girl wants a change. I said: ‘I want to go to Istanbul!’ [...] I had an uncle, a brother-in-law of my father. We called him one night so that he [takes care] of my passport. If I go or stay is another thing).

The theme develops as the narrator recalls a folktale her uncle told her:

Kunado vino para tomar el pasaporto mio, me esta diziendo: ‘Rejin, te vo a kontar una ‘storia, no se si te la vas a kreer [...] Avia una, una ija mui ermoza, desido de partir. Akel tiempo otomobil no avia, era kon karrosa. Bueno. Ke se asovio ala karrosa, vino un mansevo, la demando a kazarse kon el. I akea, s’abasho de la karrosa, se fue. Dishe: ‘la konseja viene mui ermoza. Kualo es este klonso? Ke va asperar ke se va ir, asuvir a la karrosa para ir? [...] Tu deshas estas reflekasiones.’ ‘Esto todo te lo esto kontando porke vini a demandar al primero tu opinion. Ke vo ir ande tu padre a avlar, ke kero, te kero a ti para mi ermano. (When he came to pick up my passport, he is saying to me: “Rejin, I will tell you a story. Don’t know if you will believe [...] There was a girl, a very pretty girl, [who] decided to leave. In that time there was no car, it was in a carriage [that she had to travel]. Good. When she got into the carriage, some guy came, asked her to marry him. And she got off the carriage, went [with him]. I said: “The story goes very well. What is this nonsense? To hope that I shall leave? That I shall get in the carriage for leaving? [...] You let go of these reflections”. “I am telling you all this because I came to ask for your opinion first. That I am going to speak to your father, [to tell him] that I want you for my brother”).

As the story progresses, we learn about the decisive sense of independence of the narrator—then a very young woman in an early twentieth century traditional Mediterranean society:

Yo le dishe a mi padre: ‘Yo kale ke me vo a Stambol para pensar. Yo no puedo desidirme ansina [...] Al manseviko le dire ke me ‘sto indo a Stambol. [...] ‘Shimon, mira’ le dishe, ‘Yo ‘sto mui trista agora para pensar a espozar [...] Yo me ‘sto indo a Stambol’ por kinze, vente dias, d’ayi vo mandar la repuesta’. Me disho: ‘Estos ojos ke te ‘stan viendo agora, no te van a ver mas!’<sup>17</sup> ‘Ke me estas mladiziendo?’ le dishe. ‘No ayi nada en el mundo, me ‘sto indo por kinze dias, no puedo ir kinze dias...’ ‘Yo ‘sto sintiendo aki ke no vas a tornar’.

(I said to my father: “It is necessary that I go to Istanbul to think. I cannot decide like this [...] I shall tell the young guy that I am going to Istanbul”. “Shimon, look” I said to him, “I am going to Istanbul for fifteen, twenty days, I shall send the answer from there”. He said to me: “These eyes that see you now, are never going to see you again!” “What are you cursing me?” I said to him. “There is nothing in the world, I am going for fifteen days, can’t I go [for] fifteen days...” I feel that you are not going to come back).

Interwoven into the narrative packages relating to womanhood at this stage are those of geographical locations and the movement between them; and that of war and traumatic historical events:

No torni. No me kazi no kon uno ni kon el otro. Todos fueron deportados. I yo kedi biva en Estambol. No es el destino de la persona? Son unas kozas mui, mui delikadas ke no se puede olvidar la persona. Mi padre ‘sta ‘sperando [la] repuesta [...] Ya me espozi en Estambol. i ansina kedo el echo. No los vidi mas. Eyos se fueron. Vino la gerra, se serarron los kaminos. Yo kedi en Estambol, eyos kedaron en Gresia [...] Tengo los papeles, para ansi demandavan a *Yad VaShe*, de todas las personas de la famiya. Sien personas de mi famia de fueron deportar.

(I did not return. I did not marry nor the one neither the other. Everybody got deported. And I stayed alive in Istanbul. Isn’t that a person’s destiny? These are very, very delicate things that one cannot forget. My father is waiting for the answer [...]. I already married in Istanbul, and this was how the business ended. I did not see them again. They went. The war came, the roads were closed. I stayed

17 The proverb was first recited by the narrator in Greek and then repeated in JS.

in Istanbul, they stayed in Greece [...] I have the papers, because this is what they asked for in *Yad VaShem* [=the Israeli Holocaust Memorial], of all the people of my family. A hundred people of my family who got deported.)

What initially was planned to be a short stay with relatives in Turkey eventually, as an outcome of the Holocaust and the total destruction of Greek Jewry, turned into a horrible separation that has influenced the narrator ever since then. The juxtaposition between her insistence on maintaining her independence and on controlling her own life on the one hand, and the helplessness she expresses in this paragraph on the other, conveys that she beholds life as a multi-faceted system reflected in her PN and modifying it. This example reinforces the fact that Malka Simha and the other hand Sephardic women whose PN's I analyzed do not rebel against the rules of the traditional world in which they grew up, but make them flexible, proving that wise and resourceful women may benefit from tradition by implementing their independence within its boundaries.

At yet another level stands the PN itself, enabling the women who create it to speak up and interpret their lives after having inspected the values out of which they grew. Under the surface of the corpus of PN's that this essay focuses on exists, therefore, an intuitive (as opposed to formal, political, etc.) feminist manifesto based upon a freedom to express independent thinking.

Our narrators have incorporated into their PN's materials that in their society represent male dominance, such as prayer and liturgy books in Hebrew and Ladino they independently chose to read out to me. Importing into their narratives a male territory and adopting it naturally, they implement a change in the traditional consensus by refusing to narrow themselves down to the "little tradition", and becoming instead equal to the owners of male voices that form the "great tradition", as was explained by anthropologist Robert Redfield<sup>18</sup> and adopted to Sephardic culture by Levy & Levy Zumwalt.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the contemporary feminine Sephardic PN becomes a field where women are no longer limited by patriarchal restrictions, but make their voice heard by adopting male tools and readjusting them for conveying their own messages.

18 For a detailed discussion of Redfield's model see Milton Singer, "Robert Redfield's Development of a Social Anthropology of Civilizations", in John V. Murra, ed., *American Anthropology: The Early Years, 1974 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*, St. Paul 1976, pp. 208-215.

19 Isaac Jack Levy & Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, *Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women*, Urbana and Chicago 2002, p. 5.

*“Ansina pueden dizir loke keren”*

Two important insights derive from the interpretation of womanhood and independence in the three PN’s of Sephardic women studied here. The freedom of expression provided to them when creating their PN in old age allowed them to reconsider the values that were characteristic of the traditional society from which they emerged and re-design their traditional world in their narratives. Reconsidering the rules of the old world, they make them flexible enough for proving that a wise, innovative woman may make the most out of it without revolting against its fundamental values.

As already mentioned, the PN’s we read may also be seen as statements in their own right rather than as mere reflections of the lives that they reconstruct. The very existence of such narratives represents an unconscious revolt of the women who created them. They speak up and interpret their lives through their narratives, while adopting a conceptual stand point that enables them to question the traditional values of the society out of which they grew. The process represents a new kind of freedom of thought and speech that women were deprived of in earlier generations. Therefore, under the surface of the PN’s of the contemporary Sephardic women that we are looking at a feminist awareness exists.

In this context it should be re-emphasized that as opposed to the fact that our narrators define the activity of the storytelling group as a feminine territory limited to the performance of female tales, in their PN’s they include intertexts whose nature is masculine (or at least is regarded as such by the norms of the traditional society to which the narrators belong): Jewish paraliturgical works, excerpts from prayers and from classical Ladino works—a process that we shall now proceed to analyze.

### **3. Books shifting from Male to Female Territory**

The PN is a linguistic attempt to represent life, yet language is naturally incapable of fully conceptualizing reality, which makes the embedding of objects into the narrative an act of validation, introducing parts of the narrator’s actual life into the narrative and thus validating her story and the identity it reflects. Anthropologist Janet Hoskins reports that:

I could not collect the histories of objects and the life histories of persons separately. People and the things they valued were so complexly intertwined

they could not be disentangled [...] An object can become more than simply a metaphor for the self. It becomes a pivot for reflexivity and introspection, a tool of autobiographic self-discovery, a way of knowing oneself through things.<sup>20</sup>

Her observation reinforces the question of gender in the PN's studied here. A book has a double presence: the physical object and its textual system of meanings. Bringing books into their PN's, the storytellers use the object as a symbol for the world views they wish to convey. Moreover, once specific books that mark a male dominance are included in the oral feminine PN, they are anchored in a canonical meta-narrative. An example of how this process links the narrators' individual views with their collective Jewish and Sephardic values and enables them to set foot in a world traditionally limited to men by performing paraliturgical and Midrashic texts is given by Malka Simha who chose to open her narrative with a description of her father, a leading cantor in the community where she grew up.

The narrator builds up her own identity in relation to her father and her husband, who shared both his folktales and religious books with her. Out of her own choice and without being asked to do so, she brings into the storytelling event of her PN a copy of *Meam Loez*, which is considered to be the most important and influential Sephardic Midrash composed in JS. Malka reads out of the first volume of this Bible commentary series, published by Yaakov Khuli in 1730:

Lo tengo el *Meam Loez* aki. Meldavamos kada semana kon mi marido. La *perasha* es kurto enfrente de todo ke es eskrito en el *Meam Loez* [...] No tyenes visto el *Meam Loez* en Ladino? [...] Ay munchas kozas de meldar ayi en el *Meam Loez*. Si, lo tengo, i esto es mui viejo.

(I have the *Meam Loez* here. We have read every week with my husband. The *perasha* is short in front of everything that is written in the *Meam Loez* [...] Haven't you seen the *Meam Loez* in Ladino? [...] There are many things to read in the *Meam Loez*. Yes, I have it, and this one is very old.)

Following this introduction, she goes on into reading out loud from this book that is associated with her father and her husband; she uses the book as a metonymy of her own self interacting with the two influential men of her life. Following the above quoted definition of Janet Hoskins, we might say that books enable Malka to

20 Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*, New York 1998, pp. 2, 198.

reach an autobiographic self-discovery quite unusual for a woman from a traditional background like hers. Her incorporating this confident use of the traditional book in the contemporary feminine PN is especially striking since, as Alisa Meyuhas Ginio demonstrated, the specific volume of *Meam Loez* that the narrator reads from supports the exclusion of women from the Sephardic cultural scene in the past.<sup>21</sup>

A similar use of the book’s physical and textual form was made by Sol Mymarán, who introduced her father’s prayer book into her PN. The father, she said, used to sing to her and to her brothers and sisters from this book “La ketuba de la ley” – a traditional Ladino liturgical work for the holiday of Shavuot.<sup>22</sup> The book represents the father as well as the traditional process of transmitting the traditional text while indicating its decay in the present, when the narrator claims that her children and grandchildren cannot understand it anymore:

“Mi padre, *Shavuot*, mos asentava todos i mos kantava la *ketuba* de *Shavout*. Kuando se murio mi padre, mi ermána Matilda mos asentava i mos kanto [...] Yo lo kero kantar a mis ijos. No entyenden. *Aval* alguna vez les digo ‘Atem rotzim lishmoa shel Shavuot?’ Keren, *aval* no, no se ‘stan entendiendo.

(My father, *Shavout*, sat all of us down and sang the *ketuba* of *Shavuot* for us. When my father died, my sister Matilda sat us down and sang to us [...] I want to sing to my children. They don’t understand. But each time I tell them “Do you want to hear [the song] of Shavuot?” They want, but no, they don’t understand).

Having told me that, Sol opens the book and performs a long portion of the work, which was restricted in the past to men who performed it during the Shavuot prayers in the synagogue and repeated it at home. Incorporated into the contemporary feminine PN, the traditional *Piyyut* becomes part of the narrative and enables Sol to locate herself as an equal part of the traditional chain to which she belongs and from which women had been excluded in the past. The words of the traditional text function in her

21 Alisa Meyuhas Ginio, “Esklava de su marido: A View of the Daily Life of the Sephardic Woman according to Rabbi Ya’akov Khuli’s *Me’am Lo’ez*”, in Tova Cohen and Shaul Regev, eds. *Woman in the East, Woman from the East: The Story of the Oriental Jewish Woman*, Ramat-Gan 2005, pp. 25-33. [in Hebrew]

22 “La Ketubah de la Ley” is a Ladino Koplá appearing in the Sephardic Shavuot prayer book and performed during the services of this holiday. Composed in Salonika in the eighteenth century by Yehuda Bar Leon Kalai, the song describes Moses’ descent from Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

contemporary PN as an intertext reflecting various levels of creativity and awareness. The book out of which they are read is an object that shapes individual, family, and collective memory. Through the object and the text held in it, Sol expresses her view of the traditional Sephardic culture that is ceasing to exist. Her freely performing the text that in the past could not have been performed by women is a part of her message regarding her feminine independence and the ability of women to defy the decay of the JS text in particular, and Sephardic culture in general.

#### 4. Exchange and Reflexivity

The PN's performed for my research were created by women for a woman, in a situation that encourages the shaping of feminine messages on both the personal level and on that of the conception of womanhood in general. The wider discussion from which this essay derives offers an elaborated view of the researcher's position in the research.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately it may not be further investigated within the limits of the present analysis, which, nevertheless, cannot possibly be completed without at least shortly referring to it. Being a woman from a Jerusalem Sephardic family made me an "ingroup researcher"—a definition offered and closely analyzed in the context of Sephardic studies by Tamar Alexander-Frizer).<sup>24</sup>

One of the many points of reference used in my research of the PN's of Sephardic women included an attempt to understand the reflexive dynamics on which it is based. Vincent Crapanzano discusses the epistemology of hermeneutics and his method of looking at a narrative through the dimension of depth:

What mediates between the possibility and impossibility of a best reading is the notion of depth: a plunge, 'downward' to some 'archi-text', 'deep structure', 'unconscious significance' or 'true meaning'. The metaphor of depth is compelling. Reading, interpretation and understanding become archeology or philology.<sup>25</sup>

The downwards movement into the text and the attempt to extract a deep structure from it are relevant to the creation and analysis of the PN's presented here. Consciously or

23 For full analysis see Note 7, pp. 127-147.

24 See Note 14, pp. 579-586.

25 Vincent Crapanzano, *Hermes' Dilemma and Hamlet's Desire: On the Epistemology of Interpretation*, Cambridge 1992, p. 120.

unconsciously, the narrators extract from their narratives a deep structure, through which they understand themselves and transmit their self-image and set of values to their addressee, who, on her part, forms her own deep structure in response to theirs. Anthropologist Ruth Behar described a similar interaction she was involved in while writing the book based upon fieldwork she conducted with a Mexican woman:

As the one who is no longer expanding her capacities to listen, but sitting here snipping and snipping at the historias Esperanza told me, only to sew them back [...] as a life history, I fear I am somehow cutting out Esperanza’s tongue. Yet when I am done cutting out her tongue, I will patch together a new tongue for her, an odd tongue that is [...] the language of a translated woman.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of the PN’s of Sephardic women I studied, the process worked both ways: like my informants, I too acquired a new tongue as a result of the interaction that evolved around the narratives I received. One example of this dynamics is a poem I wrote in response to the fieldwork with the women who created their PN’s for the research.<sup>27</sup> The decision to expose the poem within an academic discourse has to do with my seeing no other way to look at the complex cultural phenomenon of the PN’s I heard from elderly women storytellers. Only a careful fusion of the intellectual and the emotional perspective may, I believe, allow us to reach the most inclusive possible understanding of a human experience transformed into a narrative.

Originally written in Hebrew with some JS phrases embedded in it, the poem echoes a traditional Sephardic folk song opening with the line “Arvoles yoran por luvias i montanyas por aires” (Trees are crying for rain and mountains for air). The traditional folk song’s fictional narrator laments his or her fate, while wandering far from their beloved to die in foreign lands. It was re-versed and performed during World War II, when Balkan Sephardic Jews transported to the death camps by the Nazis found its words particularly relevant. The echoing of it in the contemporary bilingual poem captures the double dialogue that I maintain, as both a researcher and a participant in the Judeo-Spanish culture, with the women who unfurled their personal narratives for my research and kindly took me into their world.

26 Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman*, Boston 1993, p. 19.

27 See Appendix for the poem in English translation.

## Closing remarks

Dov Noy defined the feminine folktale according to its internal and external characteristics as a story told by women to women, and containing a message referring to women.<sup>28</sup> His definition is applicable to the PN's investigated here, too, yet the answers to the questions regarding the narrators' feminine messages posed at the beginning of this essay are rather complex. According to Tamar Alexander-Frizer, even in folktales of women who encourage other women to be active, the system of traditional social conventions is still operational.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, our narrators declare in their PN's that their voices should be heard and their independence be allowed, but they also imply in the hermeneutic interpretation of their lives that feminine freedom should be achieved within the traditional social setting rather than in rebellion against it.

The above reading of their PN's leads to the understanding that their unresolved conception of themselves moving between independence and surrender to traditional boundaries should not be disentangled, for it is the heart of the process of their individual (each one reflecting her own life in her PN) and collective (as active members of the storytellers' group) negotiation for feminine identity.

In her analysis of the PN of a woman who belonged to the *Biluim*, the first group of Zionist immigrants stepping out of traditional society to create a modern one in Eretz Israel, Nili Arye-Sapir demonstrated the complex process of a narrator's negotiating for her identity and womanhood through many levels of individual and collective awareness and the links between them.<sup>30</sup> Her context is, of course, quite different than the one of our narrators, yet the process itself is similar.

The women who created their PN's for this study represent the turn from a traditional Sephardic society to a modern Israeli one, with JS – their ethnic language – marking the vanishing traditional world. By the very creation of their PN's they make heard a feminine voice that has been silenced in previous generations and enable the expression of an individual and collective feminine identity and the interaction

28 Dov Noy, "Folktales in the Jewish Tunisian Family" [in Hebrew], in *Hagut Ivrit be-Artzot Ha-Islam: Studies on Jewish Themes by Contemporary Jewish Scholars from Islamic Countries*, ed. Menachem Zohori et al, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 181-188.

29 See Note 14, p. 391.

30 See Note 3.

between them that have not been legitimate in the past.<sup>31</sup> This tendency implies that their narratives are forming a feminine discourse.

The PN's investigated in this essay form a genre of folk literature that enables women to present and interpret life using their own voice and consciousness. Central to all of them, the narrative package of womanhood and independence reflects the narrators' attempt to decipher themselves as women without being subjected to the boundaries that their socio-cultural environment imposes on their voices. The PN's of women who grew out of a traditional society tending to silence their voice have a special status, as they provide their narrators with an uncensored channel of feminine expression.

Tamar Hess argues that Israeli autobiography has provided a space, albeit a narrow one, in which ethnic, class, national, and gender borders are channeled and refigured [...] and allows subversive voices to be heard.<sup>32</sup> The PN's of Sephardic Israeli women form a similar zone, which may even be more powerful, as the orally transmitted narrative is free of the traces of the self-editing convention at work in a written autobiography. The narratives I collected and interpreted center around the “heroine” who created and performed them. Through her PN, she becomes capable of portraying her world as she understands it, free of the traditional dependence on an authoritative male point of view. A new stage is created within the framework of the PN: one on which the women's voice is not threatened by any external factor whatsoever.

The women whose PN's were explored in this essay may be struggling to define the boundaries and capabilities of their voice. Yet, the voice itself is heard loudly and clearly, and the messages it conveys are exposed even when shaped in JS, the Sephardic language that changes its status from a collective, social tool to an individual-emotional one that I defined in a previous study as “personal ethnicity”.<sup>33</sup>

31 Yael Azmon discusses the exclusion of women from Jewish public life and the silencing of their voices from the middle ages on and points out that this tendency still exists in contemporary Israel. Nevertheless, she demonstrates the creation of social islands in which women may create and express their identity (see Yael Azmon, “Judaism and the Exclusion of Women from the Public Sphere”, in Yael Azmon, ed., *A View into the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies: Collected Essays* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem 1995, pp. 13-46). The storytellers' group with which we are concerned, and their personal narratives, is an example of such an island.

32 See Note 4, p. 176.

33 Michal Held, *Contemporary Literary Creation in Judezmo and Its Meaning*, MA thesis, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1995, p. 108-125.

The process confronts the silencing of the feminine voice in the traditional society from which the narrators emerged, and sets free their independent expression in the modern society in which they live today.

## **Appendix - The poem written in response to the research**

### **Tree/ Arvoles<sup>34</sup>**

A Ladino song **torno i digo ke va ser de mi**

Wandering i ask what shall become of me

In the song trees cry for rain and mountains for air

**arvoles yoran por luvias i montanyas por aires**

In the song an angel stands upon me beholding me with his eyes

and i beg to cry

but cannot

And you in the song are draped in

white

white flowers are dropping from you

from your beauty

When i sing this song once chanted by Sephardic women

draped in white and shedding white flowers

in Izmir and Salonika in Jerusalem and Tangiers

When i sing this song

trees cry tears of rain and mountains tears of air

cry for you singing women who have vanished from

the world leaving your song inside me

deserting me to wander and sing **ke va ser de mi**

what shall become of me and to seek

the angel

34 Michal Held, *Over the Face of the Waters: Poems*, Jerusalem 2009, p. 27 (in Hebrew); Translated by Michal Held.

