

“I Showed Him an Open Hand, He Showed Me a Fist”: Iconicity, Ostension, and Cross-Modal Integration in a Yiddish Folktale¹

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Abstract: This essay offers a multimodal performance analysis of a widely documented international folktale. The emergent unfolding of the tale plot, which turns on contrasting interpretations of a series of thematized gestures, illuminates the dynamic tension between iconicity and ostension in performance.

Keywords: Ostension; iconicity; gesture; multimodality

The foundations of attention to multimodality in the performance of folklore lie in the observations primarily of folktale scholars who departed from the library- and archive-based philological investigations that dominated folk narrative research to venture into the field to document folktales as recounted in the communities in which they were still current. These scholars were drawn understandably to the individuals who had the largest repertoires and were reputed to be the most virtuosic storytellers in their communities. In the course of their efforts, these “field collectors” were strongly impressed by the artistic skills of their star informants in recounting their stories, especially the dramaturgical devices and histrionic flourishes—the mimetic qualities—that the storytellers employed in performing their stories and that their audiences valued in listening to them. Prominent and especially noticeable among the devices that drew the attention of scholars was

gesture. Indeed, in what Linda Dégh called “the mimic-dramatic manner of narration... there is no narration without dramatic gestures by the narrator” (Dégh 1969:184).

Thus, from the late 19th century onwards, we find in the framing matter—Introductions, notes, appendices—of text collections published by field-oriented scholars vivid but impressionistic descriptions of the gestural flourishes that occurred together with the verbal narration and characterized the performances of their star informants (see, for example, Tillhagen 1948:260, Dorson 1956:21–22, 126; 1958:155–56). Very few and far between, however, were studies that focused analytical attention on the gestures themselves (cf. Sandor 1967; Farnell 2009), much less on the integration of the verbal and gestured aspects of performance. A notable exception is Tamar Alexander-Frizer’s detailed analysis, closely attentive to gesture, of a performance by an Israeli-Sephardic storyteller of a folktale she entitles “The Pope’s Three Questions” (Alexander-Frizer 2007).

This story is an apt candidate for close attention to gesture, as gesture is thematically central to its plot. It is part of a widely distributed international tale complex including tale types ATU 922 The King and the Abbot and ATU 924 Discussion by Sign Language (Uther 2004; see also Andersen 1923, Ben-Amos 2011:338-356). The tales in this complex have in common a plot element in which a person of low social status must submit to a test consisting of three enigmatic, apparently opaque questions posed by a powerful figure, the successful outcome of which turns on differential understandings of the questions, the aptness of the responses, or both. In ATU 924 the questions are posed in gestural form, as they are in the version analyzed by Alexander-Frizer. What we don’t yet have, and what the story seems to call for, is a semiotically informed multimodal analysis of the interplay between the verbal and gestural constituents of the tale as performed. A special issue of *Semiotic Review* devoted to ostension offers an appropriate venue for such an analysis, as ostension plays a key role in the semiotic organization of the tale.

As it happens, a version of this tale was known in my family as a favorite of my maternal grandfather though I never heard him tell it. I have two recorded versions of the story, the first on audiotape from 1961, the second on videotape from 1997, both told in Yiddish by my uncle, JK, at family gatherings, with other family members as audience on both occasions. Concentrating on the 1997 video recording, I want to focus this semiotic analysis on the cross-modal integration of the verbal and gestural dimensions of the story (Lempert 2012) as they figure in the shaping of the narrative and its performance.

Here, then, is the transcribed text of the videotaped performance in English translation; the title is mine. I have noted key gestures in relatively brief terms at the points where they occur in the narration, pending more detailed descriptions later in the discussion.

“Signing at Cross-Purposes” (ATU 924), told by JK, 77, August 2, 1997, Ellenville, New York (my translation).

There was once a shtetl in which some of the town bosses wanted all the Jews to be expelled. Half of the town bosses were of the opinion that the Jews should remain because they are useful, clever people and bring gains to the town. Thus they debated back and forth.

Finally, they went to the Pope to ask his opinion. His opinion was that the Jews are a very worthy people and that they should remain. But the head bosses became very obstinate and wanted the Jews to be driven out.

So the Pope proposed that he would summon the smartest people among the Jews and ask them questions. If they answer his questions correctly, they will be permitted to stay; and if they can't, they must be expelled.

The proposal was brought to the Jewish community and all the rabbis and scholars were afraid to accept such a responsibility.

Thus the days went by and the time came when they had to choose a representative. No one wanted to undertake the job until finally, at the last minute, the water carrier said that he wasn't afraid of the gentiles and he would go. So they took it under consideration and [although] they were also afraid to have him be their representative, they had no alternative. No one else wanted to go! So they said, “We have nothing to lose.”

And so the water carrier entered into the Pope's presence and the Pope began to ask him various questions.

When it was over, all the town bosses asked the Pope, “Well, what do you have to say?”

And he answered them, “You know, they are an exceptionally clever people! Even the water carrier was able to answer all my questions.”

“Tell us, what did you ask him?”

So he answered, "When I showed him an open hand,



he showed me a fist.



I wanted to indicate that the Jews are spread and scattered all over the world, but he showed me with his fist that they are all united regardless of where they might be.

Then I showed him two fingers to demonstrate that there are two gods, God and Jesus,



and he answered me with one finger to show they believe that there is just one God.



And the third question: I took out a piece of cheese and put it on the table to show him that the earth is flat,



and he took out an egg to show me that the earth is round!



That is most unusual! We must let them stay.”

In due time, the Jewish community was notified that the Jews could stay. So everyone ran to the water carrier to ask, “What, for instance, did the Pope ask you?”

He sort of asked me a few foolish questions. He showed me his hand, that he will slap my face.



So I showed him a fist, that I'll knock out all his teeth.



Then he showed me two fingers, that he'll poke out both my eyes.



So I showed him one finger,



that I'll stab him through and through so that nothing of him will remain.

And the third thing: he placed a piece of cheese on the table.



So I thought to myself, “Goy, you want to make blintzes?”



Here’s an egg.”²

The Unfolding of the Test-Encounter

At its core, this narrative is an expressive exploration of the semiotics of embodied action and its interpretation, revolving around an enigmatic, interactional exchange of paired gestures. This initial exchange is then recounted twice, once each by the two parties to the original interaction to their respective constituencies. The gestural interaction is set up by an orientation section in which the Jews of a community are threatened with expulsion. The Pope offers a potential escape: if a representative of the Jewish community can answer correctly a series of questions posed by the Pope, they can stay. Otherwise, they will be expelled. The wise men among the Jews are fearful of bearing the heavy responsibility of submitting to the Pope’s test, but a humble water-carrier—the lowest of the low status members of the community—fearlessly volunteers to represent the Jews. Having no choice, the community assents.

This orientation section, then, sets up the expectation of the core encounter between the Water Carrier and the Pope, which will consist of questions posed by the Pope and responses by the Water Carrier. As befits a test situation, the questions will not be for the purpose of eliciting new information but will be a test of the Water Carrier's ability to provide "correct" answers. As the story unfolds, however, the audience discovers that the questions are to take the form of gestures, that is, the Pope produces a gesture that has the illocutionary force of a question, intended to elicit a response from the Water Carrier. There is no explicit stipulation that the Water Carrier's answer is to be in gestural form as well, but he responds in kind. The key feature of the Pope's gesture-questions, the feature on which the tale turns, is that he intends for his gestures to be ambiguous, gnomic, demanding a marked degree of difficult interpretive work to come up with the "correct" answers. The gestures are vague signs, in Charles Morris's terms, their referents conspicuously underspecified (Morris 1946, 21). For his part, however, the Water Carrier considers his gestural answers to be perfectly transparent, the obvious responses elicited by the Pope's questions. The expressive effect of the story, the discovery of the disjunct interpretations of the "same" signs by the Water Carrier and the Pope which nevertheless result in a successful outcome for the Jews, demands that the respective decodings on the part of the Pope and the Water Carrier be revealed, not to each other, for each is content with his own interpretation and assumes that it is accepted by his interlocutor, but to the audience of JK's performance event. And, because each of the parties to the interaction is accountable to the stakeholders in his own constituency who want to know what happened in the test-encounter, the Pope and the Water Carrier reveal their own respective interpretations to them as well. Thus, the questions-answer pairs that make up the test encounter gain a third element—the revelation of the two parties' interpretations of their respective gestures—in the two scenes in which the Pope and the Water Carrier report to their constituents what transpired in the test encounter. Fully realized, as it is in most versions, the tale plot allows for three enactments of the three gesture-question/gesture-answer pairs, with the latter two enactments (the respective reports of the Pope and the Water Carrier to their constituents) gaining an interpretive component for each of the gestural signs.

In the version at hand, though, by the standard of the general tale-type, the plot is not fully realized. The actual test questions and answers in their full gestural form, are not recounted though the text remains complete and coherent without them. The test encounter in this version is essentially a black box: the Water Carrier enters the Pope's chamber and the next thing we know, the Pope is reporting the outcome of the test to his retainers, that is, that the Water Carrier has answered his questions correctly and that the Jews can therefore stay. Indeed, it is not until the Pope recounts the question-and-answer test exchange to the town bosses in this version that we discover that the examination consisted of an exchange of gestures.

Consider the narratological work that is at play here, specifically, the laminations of spatiotemporal frame in JK's performance. The three primary pairs of gestures in the story are all part of the Pope's and the Water Carrier's respective narrative accounts to their constituents of what transpired in the test encounter. The gestures are reenacted—quoted, in effect—from that initial interaction. In JK's performance, then, the gestures are his reenactments of the protagonists' reenactments, twice removed in time and space from the performance event before us. But from the audience's point of view, the gestures that are the embodied components of the Pope's and the Water Carrier's interpretations of their primary gestures for their respective constituencies are not quoted from the test encounter but produced afresh as they recount what happened in that interaction. JK's reanimation of those interpretive gestures in his own performance is laminated onto only one prior spatiotemporal frame, that is, the narrated events of the Pope's and the Water Carrier's reports.

The semiotics of mismatch

Let's take a closer look at these metapragmatic complexities in semiotic terms. As noted earlier, at the heart of JK's narrative is the encounter between the Pope and the Water Carrier that is organized as a test, the outcome of which will determine whether the Jewish community will be allowed to stay in place or be expelled. The test-encounter is the subject—the narrated event—of two narrative events, the first by the Pope to his constituents, the town bosses, and the second by the Water Carrier to the Jewish community. As we would expect, then, the nested narrated accounts of the Pope and the Water Carrier are framed in doubled past-tense terms: “So he **answered**,” locates the Pope's address to his constituents in the past, while “When I **showed**...” locates his actions in the test-encounter in the more distant past of the event he is narrating to his constituents. If we peel away those narrative framings, however, we come to the enigmatic core of the story: the gestural exchanges themselves.

Let's start with the Pope's verbal account of the test-encounter, consisting of his description of the three sets of paired gestures and his associated interpretations of their respective meanings.

When I showed him an open hand, he showed me a fist. I wanted to indicate that the Jews are spread and scattered all over the world, but he showed me with his fist that they are all united regardless of where they might be.

Then I showed him two fingers to demonstrate that there are two Gods, Jehovah and Jesus, and he answered me with one finger to show they believe that there is just one God.

And the third question: I took out a piece of cheese and put it on the table to show him that the earth is flat, and he took out an egg to show me that the earth is round!

The meanings that the Pope assigns to his own gestures make clear that he intends them as iconic (Peirce 1960:157), stand-alone signifiers of absent referents. In Peircean terms, his open hand is a *diagrammatic icon* in which the sign vehicle resembles its referent by virtue of “analogous relations in their parts” (Peirce 1960:157). Here, the spread fingers stand for the spread-apart dispersion of the Jews. The Pope’s two fingers and the slice of cheese are iconic *images*, in which the similarity between expression and content is one of “simple qualities” (Peirce 1960:157). Here, the duality of the Pope’s fingers stands for the duality—the quality of two-ness--of the godhead; the flatness of the slice of cheese stands for the quality of flatness of the earth.

As with his own gestures, it is clear that the Pope interprets the Water Carrier’s gestured responses as iconic as well. He interprets the Water Carrier’s closed fist as a diagram of the unity of the Jewish people. And again, he interprets the Water Carrier’s single finger and the egg as images, respectively, of the unity of the godhead and the roundness of the earth.

If we turn to the Water Carrier’s own account of the test-encounter in reporting to the Jewish community, the semiotic contrasts with the Pope’s account become apparent.

He showed me his hand, that he will slap my face. So I showed him a fist, that I’ll knock out all his teeth.

Then he showed me two fingers, that he’ll poke out both my eyes. So I showed him one finger, that I’ll stab him through and through so that nothing of him will remain.

And the third thing: he placed a piece of cheese on the table. So I thought to myself, ‘Goy, you want to make blintzes? Here’s an egg.’

As is the case with the Pope, it is the Water Carrier’s interpretations that reveal his understandings of the Pope’s opening gestures and his own responses. For him, all of the paired gestures are indexical ostensions: “Ostension occurs when a pre-existing object is

selected and shown as the representative of the class to which it belongs.” (Eco 1985:179). Or, in a fuller formulation, “Ostension occurs when a given object or event produced by nature or human action...is ‘picked up’ by someone and *shown* as the expression of the class of which it is a member.” (Eco 1976:225–25). The Water Carrier takes the Pope’s open hand not as a stand-alone signifier of a referent that he is to guess but as an agonistic instrument threatening a slap. That is, he interprets the Pope’s hand as pointed toward him—an indexical sign—but more threateningly as a literal hand, a ready-made object picked out—ostended--by the Pope that stands for the class to which it belongs, that is, a slap-delivery instrument (cf. Eco 1967:119, 227). In like manner, the Pope’s two raised fingers are indexical ostensions as well, pointed threateningly toward his eyes; the two fingers are ostensibly picked out as instruments suited for poking out an antagonist’s eyes. As for the Pope’s slice of cheese, it clearly stands for what it is, a basic ingredient in the making of cheese blintzes so the appropriate response is to hold out another key ingredient, an egg.

With both accounts of the test-encounter now in view, it is illuminating to look back again at the interlocutors’ narratives with the benefit of the hindsight thus provided. The verbal descriptions of their respective gestures provided by both interlocutors, we can observe, are strikingly similar. In the verbal accounts given by the Pope and the Water Carrier, there is near-perfect congruence between their verbal *descriptions* of their respective gestures. Here are the descriptions in tabular form:

| Gesture | Pope's Description | Water Carrier's Description |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Pope 1 | “I showed him an open hand” | “he showed me his hand” |
| Water Carrier 1 | “he showed me a fist” | “I showed him a fist” |
| Pope 2 | “I showed him two fingers” | “he showed me two fingers” |
| Water Carrier 2 | “he answered me with one finger” | “I showed him one finger” |
| Pope 3 | “I took out a piece of cheese and put it on the table” | “he placed a piece of cheese on the table” |
| Water Carrier 3 | “he took out an egg” | “here’s an egg” |

There is a bit of stylistic variance between the Pope’s and the Water Carrier’s descriptions of the latter’s third answering gesture: the Pope describes the gesture in a past tense declarative sentence while the Water Carrier describes it by quoting his reported thought. Functionally, though, the difference is minor. Overall, these verbal descriptions do the

work of establishing that there is a dimension of sameness or morphological equivalence between the sets of gestures that each of the protagonists reports.

By contrast with the verbal descriptions, however, the verbal *interpretations* establish that the “same” gestures are construable as having different meanings. Again, in tabular form:

| Gesture | Pope's Interpretation | Water Carrier's Interpretation |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Pope 1 open hand | “the Jews are spread and scattered all over the world” | “he will slap my face” |
| Water Carrier 1 fist | “they are all united” | “I’ll knock out all his teeth” |
| Pope 2 two fingers | “there are two gods, God and Jesus” | “he’ll poke out both my eyes” |
| Water Carrier 2 one finger | “there is just one God” | “I’ll stab him through and through” |
| Pope 3 piece of cheese | “the earth is flat” | “you want to make blintzes?” |
| Water Carrier 3 egg | [not verbalized] | “here’s an egg” [to go with the cheese, for blintzes] |

In terms of the unfolding of the narrative, and taking into account both the verbal descriptions of the gestures and the interpretations, it is not until the Water Carrier offers his first interpretation, decoding the Pope’s first gesture, that the mismatch between the interpretations is revealed to us. From that point onward, the crossed signals are obvious and as JK’s performance proceeds, it conveys both the element of sameness in the gestures and the element of difference in the interpretation.

What the discrepant interpretations produced by the Pope and the Water Carrier reveal is not simply an interpretive mismatch between their respective acts of signification in the question-and-answer pairs that make up the test, but a deeper interpretive gap that shaped their interaction. The Pope’s gesture-questions, the Water Carrier’s answers, and their stated interpretations of each other’s gestures makes clear a wide disjunction between their respective mindsets as they engage in the test encounter. That is, the Pope and the Water Carrier conduct their exchange oriented by deeply contrastive horizons of meaning and interpretation.

For his part, the Pope's question-gestures and his interpretation of the Water Carrier's responses show him to be operating on a plane that encompasses a wide horizon of sectarian history, theological reach, and cosmological understanding, as befits, perhaps, the supreme head of the Catholic Church. He addresses in abstract, figurative terms the worldwide diasporic dispersal of the Jewish people, the nature of the godhead, and the configuration of the world we all inhabit. The Water Carrier, in his responses, reveals through his account of the test encounter that he was oriented solely to the situation at hand and the immediacy and concreteness of his interaction with the Pontiff. He is a man of low station that affords him no space for lofty and abstract matters. Eco maintains that "ostension represents the most elementary act of active signification" (Eco 1976:224). Small wonder, then, that in the folk sociology reflected in this tale, the humble interlocutor has recourse only to the most elementary form of active semiosis. Humble in status the Water Carrier may be, however, but he is anything but meek. In fact, he confers upon the encounter a decidedly agonistic tenor, taking the Pope's gestures as physical threats and responding in kind.

The mismatch revealed by the differing interpretations of their interlocutors' gestures is reinforced by the lack of correspondence between the gestures themselves. Note that while the verbal accounts of the gestural dialogue are couched in the past tense, the gestures themselves within the narrative frame of the Pope's and the Water Carrier's accounts are, in effect, "quoted" in a manner akin to quoted speech. They are in the present tense, conveying the immediacy of the Pope's and the Water Carrier's narrative events: ostended replicas of the gestures exchanged in the test-encounter itself. That is to say, they are shifters, in Jakobson's classic sense (Jakobson 1971[1957]). Importantly, however, the Water Carrier's gestures, like his verbal interpretations, do not match those of the Pope—there is a mismatch between their respective gestures. The accompanying images reveal that the "same" gestures are not fully the same. Either the Pope, in retrospect, is misquoting the Water Carrier, or the Water Carrier is misquoting the Pope. We can't know which is the case, as we have not been privy to the test-exchange itself. Their respective gestures are, in Eco's terms, "partial replicas."

The first set of paired gestures, in which the Pope shows the Water Carrier an open hand and the Water Carrier answers with a fist, are embodied in similar manner by both protagonists: right hand open with the palm facing left, answered with the right hand closed in a fist, knuckles facing outward (see Figs. 1 and 2, 7 and 8). Thus, in both the Pope's account to the town burghers and the Water Carrier's account to the Jewish community, the verbal descriptions of the first question-answer pair and the gestures themselves are all mutually consistent, leaving only the verbal interpretations to express the mismatch between the protagonists' understandings of what went on in the test encounter.

In JK's performance of the second set of paired gestures, though, the mismatch comes strikingly to the fore. In recounting the Pope's account of the test encounter, as JK reports the Pope's statement "I showed him two fingers," he enacts the gesture with his right hand, palm facing leftward with his index and middle finger raised in a V, the other fingers closed (see Figure 3). From this primary gesture, the Pope extends his gestural production as he provides the interpretation he intends to convey: "there are two gods, God and Jesus." As the pope then recounts the Water Carrier's response, "He answered me with one finger," JK reenacts the Water Carrier's answering gesture by lifting his right hand with his index finger pointing upward at a forty-five degree angle (see Figure 4).

In the Water Carrier's account of the exchange, as he says, "Then he [the Pope] showed me two fingers," JK again raises two fingers, but in a different gestural configuration: his right arm angled forward 45 degrees from his body, hand facing forward, away from his body, with the index and middle fingers extended upward in a V formation (see Figure 9). As the Water Carrier continues with his interpretation of the Pope's gesture, "...that he would poke out both eyes," JK thrusts the raised fingers forward into the interactional space between him and his audience, that is, us. With the Water Carrier's response, "I showed him one finger," JK raises his right index finger, with his hand facing to the left, but as the Water Carrier glosses his gesture, "that I'll run him through," he rotates his right hand to the left and downward so that his index finger is pointing toward the audience and then again thrusts his arm forward into interactional space, rotating his wrist with a skewering motion (see Figure 10). The Water Carrier has thus transformed the Pope's iconic gestures, glossed as representing the duality of the godhead vs. the unity of the godhead, into indexical icons. His representation of the exchange retains an iconic element, insofar as his gestures mime, respectively, poking out an adversary's eyes and running him through with a sword, but they take on an indexical component with the deictic thrust toward an implied face-to-face opponent—and to us. In effect, JK's gestural thrusts into the interactional space of the performance event as he reenacts in the immediacy of his performance the Water Carrier's threat to poke out the Pope's eyes and run him through and through collapses the spatiotemporal gap between the storyworld and our world but also their participant structures; his aggressive gestural thrusts toward the Pope take place in our immediate space, here and now, toward us as surrogates for the Pope.

Finally, in the protagonists' accounts of the third pair of gestures, there are two dimensions of variation, one relatively minor, the other more significant. In JK's reenactment of the Pope's gesture, placing a slice of cheese on the table, he places his open right hand, palm down, on the couch beside him, a surrogate for the table, and slides it to the right to indicate that the world is flat (see Figure 5). When it comes to the Water Carrier's answering gesture, as the Pope reports it, JK inverts his right hand, fingers

downward in a slightly curled position, as if holding a rounded object, and moves his hand downward to the couch/table beside him with three small taps as if placing the egg next to the cheese and underscoring its placement (see Figure 6).

As JK performs the Water Carrier's rendition of the Pope's placement of the cheese on the table, he holds his right hand with the palm upward, rather than downward, and again slides his hand to the right (see Figure 11). Functionally, the two variants—palm downward vs. palm upward—are equivalent. When it comes to the Water Carrier's answering gesture, however, the dimension of variance is more significant. JK begins the presentation of the egg in the same manner as before, but this time, in placing it on the table, as he says, "here's an egg!" he moves his hand sharply downward and as it strikes the surface of the couch/table, he opens his fingers abruptly outward miming the breaking of the egg, as one would have to do to make blintzes (see Figure 12). This latter component, the breaking of the egg, is nowhere mentioned in the verbal account of the gesture; here, the Water Carrier is carrying his account of the test beyond what the Pope has reported, gesturally embellishing his own narrative to emphasize just how little he thinks of the Pope and his foolish test.

The ambiguity of the relationship between the Pope's ostension of his own and the Water Carrier's gestures in his account to his constituents and the Water Carrier's ostension of those gestures carries over, of course, into the outermost narrative frame before us: JK's performance. His gestures in the performance event are quoted ostensions in the present tense of the interlocutors' quoted ostensions of their gestures in the test-encounter, serving as shifters of the narrated events into the immediate presence of JK's audience. Moreover, JK's enactment of the Water Carrier's integrated verbal and kinesic account merges us, as audience, with the *dramatis personae*. As he intrudes his ostended gestures into the interactional space of the performance event, holding his open palm as if in readiness to slap us or thrusting his two fingers toward us as if to poke out our eyes, we become the Water Carrier under threat. Reciprocally, as he brandishes his fist or thrusts his finger toward us in a skewering motion, we become the Pope as the target of his aggression.

Conclusion

The Water Carrier's down-to-earth and felicitous response to the Pope's final gesture brings both his story of the test encounter and JK's performance to an emphatic end, leaving him with a bemused half-smile on his face in reflective enjoyment once again of his father's favorite story. The basis of the tale's appeal is obvious: the least of the common people among the Jews has bested the highest of the goyim at his own game and saved his people from impending exile. This outcome, far happier than we might have expected based on the threatening situation laid out in the orientation section of the story,

would alone account for the prominence of the tale in the Jewish repertoire. What I would like to suggest, though, in closing, is that beneath this evident basis for the story's appeal, there is a level of reflexivity at play that enriches the texture of this popular tale.

As JK's performance unfolds, it becomes clear that the climactic point of the story and the basis of its expressive effect is the revelation that the Pope and the Water Carrier have entirely different understandings of the gestures they exchange and the ties of coherence between the parts of the question and answer pairs, hardly surprising given the religious, social, and intellectual gulf that divides them. Remarkably, however, their discrepant interpretations are nevertheless sufficiently complementary to be functionally consistent and lead to mutually felicitous outcome: to the satisfaction of both the Pope and the Water Carrier, the Jews can stay. In the narrated events that follow the test encounter—which, of course, themselves depict the narrative events in which the Pope and the Water Carrier offer their accounts of their interaction—each of the interlocutors comes away believing that their exchanges have proceeded in terms of shared interpretations of the gestures and yielded congruent understandings leading to correct answers on the part of the Water Carrier. In the encompassing performance event, the audience—that is, us—experiences the emergent realization that the Pope and the Water Carrier do not share an understanding of what went on in the gestural exchange, nor do their respective constituents after the participants recount to them what they believe to have happened. We come ultimately to realize that their respective interpretations of their own and their interlocutor's gestures were complementary, rather than equivalent. The tale emerges in the end as a metasociological representation of the principle that shared understanding is not necessary for the achievement of mutually satisfactory interaction, only complementarity (cf. Bauman 1972a, 1972b). There is a metanarrational correlate here as well played out in the story: when the participants in an event marked by differential understandings of what is going on report that event to others, their narrative accounts will be very different, shaped by their contrastive understandings of the event, its unfolding, and its outcome. Yes, this is a tale about how an unprepossessing member of the community saves the Jews from exile, but it is also a vernacular disquisition on social difference and the nature of experience, and how those asymmetries shape stories.

Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this article, unillustrated and without reference to ostension, was published in *Contexts of Folklore: Festschrift for Dan Ben-Amos on his Eighty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Simon Bronner and Wolfgang Mieder (New York: Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 47-57). For the current version I would like to thank Rachael Stoeltje for assistance in digitizing the original videotape and Carmel Curtis for extracting the still images and gifs that are so essential to the analysis and presentation of the narrative performance. Thanks also to Jeffrey Tolbert for advice and encouragement in the preparation of the essay.↩

2. *Blintzes* (sing., *blintz*), a characteristically Ashkenazic dish, are thin, rolled pancakes, filled with soft cheese, similar to crepes. ↩

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