

# FOLKLORE

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A PARABLE IN CONTEXT: A SOCIAL INTERACTIONAL  
ANALYSIS OF STORYTELLING PERFORMANCE

As early as 1925, Malinowski sounded a strikingly modern note in his classic essay, "Myth in Primitive Psychology", where he emphasized a performance orientation to the study of Trobriand folktales and stressed the importance of the social and cultural contexts of storytelling. Speaking of *kukwanebu* (fairy tales), Malinowski said:

The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless. As we have seen, the interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. The whole nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the audience mean as much to the natives as the text; and the sociologist should take his cue from the natives. The performance, again, has to be placed in its proper time setting – the hour of the day, and the season, with the background of the sprouting gardens awaiting future work, and slightly influenced by the magic of the fairy tales. We must also bear in mind the sociological context of private ownership, the sociable function and the cultural role of amusing fiction. All these elements are equally relevant; all must be studied as well as the text. The stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality.<sup>1</sup>

Ten years later, in 1935, Malinowski refined his notion of context when he discussed the contextual specification of meaning as part of his ethnographic theory of language and made a very important distinction between "the context of situation and the context of culture". He showed how the meaning of words, sentences, narratives, and other genres of speaking

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<sup>1</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (New York, 1926). Reprinted in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (New York, 1948), 104.

was conditioned by "the situation in which the utterance is being made and the situation to which it refers".<sup>2</sup>

Folklorists and anthropologists since Malinowski have tended to study oral tradition in its ramified cultural context and general social setting while abstracting particular items of folklore from their immediate contexts of use.<sup>3</sup> At best, the investigator may specify the types of storytelling situations in general – legends were told "in homes, in stores, and at ritual ceremonies"<sup>4</sup> and occasionally he may provide a brief description of what a typical tale occasion is usually like. This lack of interest in immediate contexts of use, in how one performer actually uses a particular tale on a specific occasion, reflects the preoccupation of folklorists with two important aspects of storytelling. First, in contrast with ordinary speech, folktales are preformulated. As a result, scholars have tended to view them as set pieces or autonomous entities and have recorded them most often in artificial interview contexts. Second, folklorists have concentrated on specialized storytelling events, that is, on speech events in which the focus is upon telling tales and narration is the dominant mode of discourse. Although in such narrative sessions, each of the preceding tales and non-narrative speech acts do create a frame of reference for the stories which follow, it is often the case that *there are several other narratives which could have served as functional equivalents for many of the tales actually told.*<sup>5</sup> This important feature of specialized

<sup>2</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and their Magic II* (London, 1935), 73, 45.

<sup>3</sup> This general tendency is clearly seen in such major contributions to the study of folk narrative as Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Evanston, 1958); Ruth Benedict, *Zuni Mythology* (= *Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology XXI*) (New York, 1935); Jerome R. Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim: An Introduction to Hasidic Culture and Oral Tradition in the New World* (Chicago, 1968); Melville Jacobs, comp., and John Greenway, ed., *The Anthropologist Looks at Myth* (= *Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series 17*) (Austin and London, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, 3. See pages 4-5 for a description of a typical tale session.

<sup>5</sup> Among the Trobrianders, Limba, Bahamians, Hungarians, and other European and African groups, the participants in this type of storytelling session are often interested in narration primarily as an act of sociability and in the tales as objects in themselves. And this interest is reflected in the competitive structure of joke swapping sessions where each raconteur may try to top the preceding narrator with a better or funnier anecdote and the participants may make special requests for their favorite tales.

For detailed descriptions of such tale sessions, see Linda Dégh, *Folktales and Society: Storytelling in a Hungarian Peasant Community*, Emily Schossberger, trans. (Bloomington, 1969), 63-120. Dégh concludes her comprehensive discussion of the specialized type of tale occasion in Europe with a thorough analytical description of one storytelling event in particular. Ruth Finnegan, in *Limba Stories and Storytelling*

storytelling events may explain in part why folklorists have treated narratives as set pieces and have stressed their invariant features rather than the performer's creativity in selecting the appropriate tale and in adjusting his rendition of it to each new situation. Thus, in accounts of storytelling, we generally find information about the broad cultural context of the tales and occasionally an indication or general description of the major types of storytelling occasions. Very rarely do we come across accounts of *actual* narrative events.

Furthermore, scholars have tended to neglect the type of narrative performance in which a narrator embeds a tale in a stretch of non-narrative discourse. In such cases, the raconteur will usually take considerable care to fit the particular tale to the immediate social context and because of this he may be hardpressed to find other tales which could serve as a functional equivalent. These are the storytelling performances which arise spontaneously and even unexpectedly in the course of conversation and which exhibit an especially close fit between text and context. Because of these characteristics, such performances lend themselves most dramatically to an analysis in terms of the structure of social interaction which is based upon a detailed description of the immediate context in which the story was actually told.

The present social interactional analysis of one performance in depth represents an attempt to examine folklore in its immediate context of use as a highly structured, integrated form of interpersonal behavior. Rather than conceiving of context as a mass of detail which is relegated to a headnote or footnote as 'background information' or 'atmosphere', the 'performance' will be my unit of analysis and I will try to show in detail precisely how a narrative event is structured and how a creative raconteur integrates a preformulated utterance such as a parable into a specific social interaction. I have chosen to analyze a parable because, being a didactic metaphor, it usually appears in the course of non-narrative discourse such as conversation rather than as a relatively self-contained unit in a specialized storytelling session. Like fables and proverbs, parables are a traditional technique for coping with problematic social situations. It is therefore especially appropriate to analyze the performance of a parable as an example of "interpersonal ritual behavior" which attempts to restore harmony after someone has

(Oxford, 1967), 40-46, 64-69, also discusses in detail the tale occasions among the Limba and describes particular performances as cases in point. See also Daniel J. Crowley, *I Could Talk Old-Story Good: Creativity in Bahamian Folklore* (= *California Folklore Studies 17*) (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966) and Malinowski, *Myth*.

'made a scene'.<sup>6</sup> This type of analysis with its emphasis upon the immediate context of use can also reveal how the social situation contextualizes the meaning of a tale and foregrounds the themes which are relevant to the narrator on a particular occasion. Thus, following Malinowski's later refinements on the concept of context, I will be analyzing one storytelling performance in terms of "the situation in which the utterance is being made and the situation to which it refers" in order to dramatize the structure of a storytelling performance, the integration of narrative and social setting, and the contextual specification of meaning.

#### THE NARRATOR AND HER REPERTOIRE

Dvora Katz was born in 1915 in Brest-Litovsk, Poland, and came to Canada with her mother and siblings in 1929. Her mother, who died in 1949, is the chief source of the proverbs and parables in Dvora's repertoire. In the course of several conversations with me, Dvora revealed that she sees both herself and her mother as being especially skilled at getting along with other people, at resolving conflicts between others and "at putting things in such a way that no one is hurt". In her role as mediator, she frequently eases anxious social encounters by using about ten different parables and over one hundred proverbs which she remembers her mother applying to the foibles of human behavior in the course of conversations which took place more than twenty-five years ago. Included in the parables which Dvora learned from her mother are:

Aa-Th 1682 *The Groom Teaches his Horse to Live without Food*. It dies.

In Dvora's version a stingy man is dismayed when, after weeks of reducing the horse's food, the animal is finally trained to eat nothing. "Just when I taught him to live without food, he goes ahead and dies." Dvora uses the parable to comment on the self-defeating nature of stinginess.

Aa-Th 163A\* *The Bear Chases away the Flies* that annoy his master. By chance he strikes his master dead [Aa-Th 1586A *Fatal Killing of the Insect* (c) A tame bear sees a bee light on his sleeping master's mouth and drops a heavy stone on the bee, killing his master; see also Motif N333.2. *Man accidentally killed by bear trying to chase away flies*].

<sup>6</sup> Erving Goffman, "On Facework: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction", *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* 18 (1955), 213-31. Reprinted in Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior* (New York, 1967), 5-45.

Dvora uses this tale to make the point that a foolish friend can do more harm than a clever enemy.

Aa-Th 288B\* *The Over-hasty Toad (Beetle)* is years ascending steps. On last step falls and curses haste. [Motif X1862. *The over-hasty toad (beetle)* is years ascending steps. On last step falls and curses haste.]

Dvora's version is about a little girl who takes all day to buy a bottle of milk and drops the bottle just as she arrives home. She says to her mother, "Nothing good can come of rushing." Dvora's mother used to reprimand her with this parable when, as a child, she procrastinated about doing her chores.

Aa-Th 774N *St. Peter's Gluttony*. Jesus keeps asking him questions so that he must continually spit out mouthfuls.

In Dvora's version, a guest comes to a very stingy rich man's house for the Sabbath meal. In an effort to make the guest eat less, the host tries to get the guest talking by asking him questions about each person in the guest's home town. To every query, the guest replies, "He's dead." Finally, the host asks how come everybody in that town has died and the guest replies, "When I eat everything is dead."

Motif J121. *Ungrateful son reproved by naive action of his own son*: preparing for old age. Man gives his old father half a carpet to keep him warm. Child keeps the other half and tells his father that he is keeping it for him when he grows old.

Dvora uses this story to comment on parent-child relationships. One of her favorite proverbs is 'one mother can take care of ten children but ten children cannot take care of one old mother'. In this parable, the treatment of the old man by his son exemplifies this maxim. Dvora also emphasizes how this parable shows the importance of setting a good example for your children.

#### TRANSCRIPTION OF NARRATOR'S REPORT OF HER PERFORMANCE OF ONE PARABLE

On March 24, 1968, I mailed a blank tape to the Katz family in Toronto, with instructions to record traditional narratives in the context of a festive social gathering of close friends and relatives. One of the texts recorded on this occasion was a report by Dvora Katz of how she used a parable on a particular occasion with reference to a specific social situation. The individuals referred to in the following text were present:

DVORA: I have to tell you something and this was a true fact. Once I was at my brother's and the atmosphere was tense. My brother had promised the kids to take them to a show over and over again and he was busy in the office and he had no time. Are you listening?

AL: Yea.

DVORA: Next time. And he was busy and each time he made an appointment something else came up and the kids were disappointed. It was an afternoon show, a morning show. Nothing worked.

I come in and my sister-in-law, Ruth, was upset and the kids were crying and my brother says, "O.K." This was nine o'clock. "We can go to a show now." Nine o'clock nobody wants to go to a show. It was late and there was just no point. So I saw there was going to be a revolution because he couldn't understand why they can't go to a show. The kids realized that he should have gone when he made the promise to go so many times. Ruth felt that he was unfair and I thought at this point they need something to break the ice because the atmosphere was just too thick. So I says, "You know, this reminds me of a story."

No. My brother comes up and he says, "Dvora, tell me. Tell me what is wrong with a father wanting to take his children to a show? What have I done? Have I committed a crime? I want my children to go with me to a show. They all say I'm doing something wrong. What's wrong?"

So I says, "I'll tell you. It reminds me of a story my mother used to tell me."

A man once came to a rabbi to ask a *shayle* 'question regarding ritual purity', forgiveness.

He says, "What is it? What did you do?"

He says, "I didn't wash.... I didn't say the prayer before the meal."

He says, "How come?"

He says, "Because I didn't wash my hands."

He says, "Well, why didn't you wash your hands?"

He says, "Because I wasn't eating Jewish food."

He says, "How come you weren't eating Jewish food?"

"Because I was eating in a Gentile restaurant."

He says, "How come?"

"Because it was *Yonkiper* 'Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement, most solemn Jewish holiday and fast day, when every man's fate for the coming year is said to be decided' and the Jewish restaurants were closed."

So this, I said, reminds me of my brother, "Why can't I take them to the show?" Here he had made so many promises and so many disappointments. He couldn't understand how come the kids didn't want to go to the show.<sup>7</sup>

This parable is a formula tale employing a chain with interdependent members<sup>8</sup> and may be identified as the motif "Penitent in confession worries about little sins and belittles big ones" (Rotunda U 11.1.1.2.).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The transcription of Yiddish words reflects the basic features of the speaker's dialect pronunciation. Dialect forms are placed in square brackets. Standard Yiddish forms are italicized. Translations and glosses are placed in single quotes. Translations and glosses of terms are based upon Uriel Weinreich's *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* (New York, 1968). The Yiddish transliteration system used here is based on that used by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the Library of Congress.

<sup>8</sup> See Archer Taylor, "A Classification of Formula Tales", *Journal of American Folklore* 46 (1933), 77-78.

<sup>9</sup> D. P. Rotunda, *Motif-Index of the Italian Novella in Prose* (Bloomington, 1942).

This tale has been recorded often from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources<sup>10</sup> and, in several collections, it appears as a framed narrative: the tale itself is embedded in a description of the social situation it reflects and in which it was reputedly told. Thus, Dvora is not exceptional in utilizing this particular tale as a parable, although the way she does so is unique. Furthermore, even *her report of her performance* is a traditional narrative since it constitutes a framed tale for which there are several analogues in printed collections.<sup>11</sup>

#### GENRE TERMINOLOGY

When spontaneously referring to this narrative in English, Dvora used the terms "story", "example", and "illustration". On two occasions, I recorded Dvora's Yiddish designations for this tale. First, during a taped interview conducted almost exclusively in Yiddish, Dvora spontaneously told this tale to a Rabbi and his wife, referring to it as *a mayse vos mayn mame oleasholem hot dertseylt* 'a story (tale, yarn) which my mother, may she rest in peace, told' and adding [*dus iz a tsigepaster mushl fun tugteyglekhn leybn*] 'this is an appropriate example (instance, illustration, fable, parable) from everyday life'. No reference was made to the terminology which she used on this occasion. Second, about four months later, I asked her in English, "You know the one about the man who didn't say the prayer before he ate? If you had to refer to it in Yiddish, what would you call it?" She answered, "A *mayse* 'story, tale, yarn' or a *bayshpil* 'example, instance'." I then asked her, "What about the term *moshl* 'example, instance, illustration, fable, parable'?" She replied that this was precisely the term which her mother had always used when referring to these particular stories but that she herself did not remember hearing or using this term in Canada. She had either forgotten or was not aware that she used the term *moshl* in her conversation with the Rabbi.

*Moshl* is a word from the Hebrew-Aramaic component of Yiddish. Although it may be translated by five different English words, each of these English words, with the notable exception of 'parable', may also be rendered in Yiddish by terms other than *moshl*:

<sup>10</sup> Haim Schwarzbaum provides detailed annotations for this tale in *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (Berlin, 1968), 326-28.

<sup>11</sup> Analogues to this parable as a framed tale appear in Naftoli Gross, *Ma'aselech un Mesholim* (New York, 1955), 349; and in S. Y. Zevin, *Sippure Hassidim I* (Tel Aviv, 1956-57), 65-66.

example – *der moshl, der bayshpil; di dugma*  
 instance – *der fal; der oyfvayz, der moshl, der bayshpil*  
 illustration – *di illustratsye, der moshl*  
 fable – *der moshl, di fabl*  
 parable – *der moshl*

It is noteworthy that the Yiddish terms for proverb (*dos veltsvertl, dos shprikhvort*), aphorism (*der aforizm, dos glaykhvertl*), and saying (*dos vertl*) do not overlap with the terminology associated with parable, fable, and example. Ben-Amos has remarked that both Perry and Johnson note in their respective discussions of fable and *marshal* (the Hebrew word for *moshl*) that the same term is used for both proverb and parable in Hebrew and Greek. The terminology for proverb in Yiddish is drawn from the German component of the language whereas the word for parable are from the Hebrew-Aramaic part of Yiddish.<sup>12</sup>

Of the five suggested English translations of *moshl* only 'parable' and 'fable' convey the special combination of 'traditional story' and 'example' which Dvora repeatedly tried to express. Since 'fable' may be designated by *di fabl*, I have chosen to reserve the term *moshl* for 'parable'. I will refer to the story under analysis as a *moshl* or parable, which I define as a traditional narrative which is used as a didactic metaphor.<sup>13</sup>

Dvora has herself observed that she speaks Yiddish differently (she says her Yiddish "improves") when she is talking to someone such as a Rabbi, who in her estimation speaks a "good" or "beautiful" Yiddish. Hutterer has noted that stylistically, "increased eloquence is in EY [Eastern Yiddish] associated with a rising frequency of the Hebrew-Aramaic component".<sup>14</sup> Without investigating here all the 'improvements'

<sup>12</sup> Ben Edwin Perry, "Fable", *Studium Generale* 12 (1959), 17-37; A. R. Johnson, "Marshal", in *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 11 (Leiden, 1955), 162-69. In a personal correspondence (1971), Dan Ben-Amos suggested that, "It may be a case in which philology (or historical linguistics) enters into a discussion of synchronic analysis."

<sup>13</sup> The differentiation of types of moralizing tales (parable, fable, exemplum, chria) and moralizing statements (proverb, sententia, aphorism, etc.) will not be discussed here. Various aspects of this problem have been investigated by Perry in "Fable"; Dan Ben-Amos, "Narrative Forms in the Haggadah: A Structural Analysis" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Indiana U., 1966); Henry A. Fischel, "Story and History: Observations in Greco-Roman Rhetoric and Pharisaism" (= *American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, Semi-centennial Volume, Asian Studies Research Institute, Oriental Series* 3) (Bloomington, 1969), 59-88; Henry A. Fischel, "Studies in Cynicism and the Ancient Near East: The Transformation of a Chria", in *Religions in Antiquity*, Jacob Neusner, ed. (Leiden, 1968), 372-411; Roger Abrahams, "The Rhetoric of Parable and Fable", manuscript.

<sup>14</sup> C. J. Hutterer, "Theoretical and Practical Problems of Western Yiddish Dialectology", in *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore, and Literature*

which Dvora makes and what specifically *she* associates with a 'good Yiddish', we may observe that she does try to avoid anglicisms and to be precise in her choice of diction when she is speaking a "better Yiddish". It is therefore noteworthy that it was in her conversation with the Rabbi that she spontaneously used the term *moshl*. She respects the Rabbi as a learned man and he speaks Yiddish almost exclusively, having never gained proficiency in English. Her use of the term *moshl* on this occasion may have been prompted by her desire to speak more eloquently since the term *moshl* does belong to the Hebrew-Aramaic component of the language and is more precise than *mayse*. Furthermore, consistent with Max Weinreich's statement that "concepts from the domain of Jewish tradition and Jewish group life to a large degree are denoted in Yiddish by words of Hebrew origin",<sup>15</sup> *moshl* has strong Jewish cultural associations, as does her story and the analogical way she used it. The difference in the designations elicited from Dvora on these two occasions suggests that the collection of native terminology, particularly from bilingual and multilingual speakers, can be profoundly affected by the immediate linguistic and social context. It is therefore important to observe which terms are used spontaneously under a variety of circumstances as well as to elicit terms by direct questioning.

#### CASE HISTORY OF THE NARRATOR'S PERFORMANCE

As I was not present when the parable was originally told, what I am analyzing is *Dvora's report of her performance*. First, her account is a meaningful unit of analysis because it constitutes a culturally relevant case history in which she defines the natural boundaries – the beginning, focus, and end – of a unit of spoken interaction: by unit, I mean "the total activity that occurs during the time that a given set of participants have accredited one another for talk and maintain a single moving focus of attention";<sup>16</sup> second, her report is valuable because of its subjective perspective revealing as it does how she sees her performance and what she considers important.

Third Collection, Marvin I. Herzog, Wita Ravid, and Uriel Weinreich, eds. (The Hague, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> Max Weinreich, "Yidishkayt and Yiddish: On the Impact of Religion on Language in Ashkenazic Jewry", in *Mordecai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1953), 481-514. Reprinted in Joshua A. Fishman, ed., *Readings in the Sociology of Language* (The Hague, 1968), 404.

<sup>16</sup> Goffman, "On Facework", 35.

In order to construct a detailed case history of this particular event, I also elicited data in interviews which revealed points not explicit in Dvora's report of her performance; for example, her alternate courses of action and how she chose among them. Dvora's account of the social situation in which she used the parable and to which she applied it is an artistic narrative in its own right.<sup>17</sup> Without underestimating the influence of the parable upon the narrator's original perception of the social situation, it is noteworthy that when later reporting on what happened, she tends to stylize her account of the social situation on the model of the parable in order to highlight the 'appropriateness' and hence the effectiveness of her use of this story. Although her spontaneous report does reveal with particular clarity what she considers important about the social situation and what she thinks made the parable so appropriate to it, her account is a simplification. Therefore I am supplementing her report with interviews in which I questioned her about the social context without reference to the parable in order to reduce somewhat the effect of stylization upon her description of the social setting. Throughout this analysis, then, I will distinguish between the informant's *performance*, her spontaneous and uninterrupted *report* about her performance, and her *answers* in interviews to questions about her performance.

The following excerpts from the interviews (October 18, 1968; October 27, 1969, morning and evening; October 30, 1969) make explicit how Dvora sized up the situation; the focus of her performance; the alternate courses of action she might have followed; why she decided to tell a story; the appropriateness of the parable; and the effects of her performance. The emphasis in the transcription is my own.

#### *Sizing up the situation*

Because of the layout of the kitchen, Ruth and Max, Dvora's sister-in-law and brother, were able to place themselves in positions where they could not see each other; but Dvora, who stood in the doorway, could see them both. When asked, "Do you remember how people were standing or where they were positioned?" Dvora provided an emotionalized map in which positions were an expression of feeling:

<sup>17</sup> Peter Seitel, in "Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor", *Genre* 2:2 (1969), 143-61, distinguishes the occasion on which a proverb is used, the imaginary situation presented in the proverb, and the social situation to which the proverb refers. In the case of the parable analyzed in this paper, the occasion on which the parable is used is part of the situation to which the parable refers.

Max was in his usual seat [at the head of the table] but he was standing because it was just too tense a situation to sit ... He couldn't sit and argue. So he was standing up and arguing with Ruth, "Why doesn't she let the kids go?"

.....  
When I came in, she [Ruth] was near the sink clearing up and washing dishes and she was in no mood even to discuss anything. She was just too fed up ... Ruth wasn't even talking ... She had her back to him, but she, you couldn't help hearing her laugh [after the story was told].

.....  
I was facing the two of them ... I stood like this [in the doorway] and I told the story so that each one could hear it.

.....  
INTERVIEWER: When you came in the door, who spoke to you first?

DVORA: Max. Ruth wasn't even talking. She was just too upset and too disgusted and she didn't have to tell me what preceded. She knows I know what the situation is at home all the time. When I came in, so he made the whole fuss. He wants to take them to the show. She won't let them [because of the late hour] and so on and so forth, and I listened and I knew exactly what had happened. I didn't need any explanations. *So after I saw what was going on and there was just no relief there because nobody's going to budge one inch. He wasn't going to say he was sorry because he didn't intend to change his pattern. He was going to do the same thing next Saturday, so that I thought that this was just the situation that needed this kind of an example.*

#### *Focus*

INTERVIEWER: O.K. Now, when you told that story to the Sokolovs and you were there, did you find yourself addressing the story to one person or another or just to everybody?

DVORA: To Max, directly to Max. I addressed it directly to Max but there was also the hope that the humorous part of it would ease the situation, ease the tension and it would make it light ... I addressed actually the story to Max because he tried too hard to convince me that there is nothing wrong.

#### *Alternate courses of action*

##### *A. Take Max's side and convince the family to go to the movies*

DVORA: When I told the story I did not know how Max would react. My first impulse and reason for it [telling the story] was to reach Max. He has asked me a question, "What is wrong?" and he didn't really want me to answer because he knew what was wrong, I am sure. He was in a dilemma. He wanted to appease Ruth. His conscience would be eased. He would feel much better if they would accept his last offer.

INTERVIEWER: What did he think you would do?

DVORA: I don't know if he thought I would talk them into it or whatever. Firstly, it was in desperation and an opportune time – I had just walked in at that particular moment – and he may have hoped I would have some influence because on many occasions he would turn to me and ask me to speak to Ruth. He may have thought I would take his side and perhaps talk to Ruth so that she would allow the kids to go out with him and I think that this was mainly in his mind. Everyone was against him and maybe he thought he could get me to agree with him because no one was on his side. I honestly think that this was a moment of desperation and he hoped for some approval on my part.

.....

DVORA: Now if I would have said to him, "It isn't such a drastic thing really. You should have taken them in the afternoon, but maybe something came up that you couldn't. So you could go now, but since they cannot, they're too tired or whatever it is, well, it's too bad but it isn't so terrible."

INTERVIEWER: I see.

DVORA: That would have been the end of the whole thing and he would have been perfectly satisfied ... If I would have done this, first of all it would be most hypocritical. It wouldn't be honest and it couldn't be sincere. So that would be for my part. There would be no satisfaction for me because I did not act sincerely. Three ways – there were three people involved: myself, Ruth, and Max. So I would have done nothing for myself. Now I'll pass on to Max. You wanted me to appease Max, to tell him nothing was so terrible. I would have not fooled him in the least. He's smart and he would see right through this that I was just trying to humor him like a child, because firstly, he knows my feelings and it would be a farce. And he would realize that it would be a child's game to be hypocritical in a time like this. So that would serve no purpose whatsoever. Then comes in Ruth. She would have been most annoyed, justifiably so, because she would realize that this wasn't a sincere act on my part and who was I fooling. I would have achieved nothing except antagonize and act not sincere. Whereas what I did, I was able to bring some humor and laughter out of Ruth even for a moment. I was able to give an example to Max without directly hitting him – to let him reflect and left some food for thought. He would see it clearer, more objectively, without emotions, instead of directly hurting him.

### B. Tell Max bluntly he is in the wrong.

DVORA: Why did I show an example? Why couldn't I go right to the point and say "You want to know Max, what is wrong with a father not taking his children to the show and what is wrong with a father wanting to be together with his children, why you should be refused? I will tell you what is wrong. You are not a good father. You have promised your children many times. To you, your business is more important. You are greedy. You have a lot of money. You don't need all this. Your children don't want the *yerishe* 'inheritance'. They want you now. They don't want the money when you are dead. They want to have your person." I would make him feel as cheap as a cent. I could

do all these things. Now what would I accomplish? I would defeat the whole purpose.

### C. Tell Max a story instead of telling him straightforwardly he is in the wrong.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you use a story instead of just telling him straightforwardly?

DVORA: I don't think he was receptive to a lecture and for me to tell him. He could give me all kinds of reasons why he didn't keep his appointments last week and why he didn't start taking them to the galleries or wherever he promised for today. Why did he start now at eight o'clock to go to a show? *He could give me many many reasons and it would, I think, it would just cause a lot of unpleasantness ...* He had good reasons but they have reasons to feel the way they do. This would more or less illustrate it better than giving him a lecture. ...

My, my main reason was that I wanted him to realize what he has done and I didn't want to come out and say to him, "You have done this and this and that." I didn't want to hurt him by emphasizing all these things. Neither would he be receptive, nor would he like it. It would only cause more guilt, as a result more anger and confused and emotional disturbance in him and then he wouldn't function at all. But by doing this [telling the parable], I thought it would ease that tension and I would be able to reach him to be able to see the situation and think about it and perhaps do something about it eventually and for the moment I wasn't even thinking about the future. I just thought for the moment this is the best way of answering his question and he directed it to me and asked me why. I thought if I'm going to tell him why, I'm not going to tell him what he did. I'm going to show him what somebody else did and maybe he can identify himself with that person and that way I'm not hurting him. I'm not saying to him, "you did this." I'm showing him "Someone else did it. Do you see any similarity?"

... I just thought that this was the best way I could handle this and I really felt sad for him. I felt really bad. As much as he was to blame I felt bad that he was in this situation without being able to control it and being able to do something about it. ... *if I gave him these arguments he would have to rationalize and come back with all kinds of excuses which were excuses ... All I would do is strengthen Ruth's anger because I would put all the emphasis on the things she is already angry about so I would only magnify them and agree with her that he has done so many things wrong which I don't have to ...* The questions he asked me – he knew the answers. *He just didn't want to face up to them. He knew all these answers. Doesn't he know what he is doing to hurt his family? They've told him over and over again. But by doing what I did, I answered them without really hurting him. I spoke about a different, a third person and I illustrate a sample that he can mirror himself in it and see it and all the answers are there and it's done in such a subtle way as if I didn't touch him at all and I think that this had more effect on him and I didn't build up the ease more for Ruth to make her flame more because she would have seen it even worse than what she sees it.*



*Appropriateness of the parable*

INTERVIEWER: Why does the man [in the parable] say that, of all the things he did wrong, why does the man pick the hands?

DVORA: He picks the least important.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

DVORA: Because if you do something wrong it is so much easier to approach it in this manner so that by the time ... you slowly build it up to the important factor. He approaches him [the Rabbi] with a feeling of guilt and, uh, to come to right to the point he feels that he's done a real bad thing, a real crime, but if he starts it with washing his hands, he also hoped that maybe it wouldn't, the Rabbi wouldn't go into all these details and he'd give him forgiveness for the smallest thing instead of for the biggest. But the Rabbi went from, step by step to find out why, why, why, and he found out the original sin which was eating on *Yonkiper* which was a big one ...

... I am sure he was fully aware of what he did. It was just a way of handling it to soften the blow or maybe it would never reach to that stage.

... leading up slowly step by step and it eased it. Each time it became a little bit bigger, bigger, bigger and somehow it eased the way. It wasn't such a big blow right at the beginning ... In relation to everyday life, in relation, it is a significant approach because we all seem to minimize the underlying causes. We sort of, you know, the last effect, the last thing that happened, this is what we ... Somehow, it seems it's easier for us to do this than to analyze and to think what was preceded and treat the real root and the beginning of it all. So after a lot of things accumulate, we don't bother going to the beginning. We just say, "*Oh I can't understand why*" for, for the last step, but, that is only an accumulated, piled up situation.

*Effect of telling the parable*

INTERVIEWER: What effect did your story have on him?

DVORA: Being able to laugh made him able to see it [the situation] without being all wound up inside.

... And this was really my aim and it worked much, even more so than expected. Not only did, *did I answer him and he laughed at it and accepted it without any kind of trying to rationalize that it also reached Ruth* and that the whole atmosphere was electrifying. It really was something that the response was beautiful.

... I can't tell you how receptive they received it. ... Max with his guilt feelings and angry feelings and what not just couldn't stop laughing. He thought it was really, uh, very funny. And Ruth, not even wanting to because being plenty angry, just had to laugh. She just couldn't help it.

... it was such a hilarious reaction ... they understood it so well and even Max received it so that Ruth was pleased in a way. It was humorous and *she was also pleased in a way the situation was clear ... With the explaining of the story she realized that we all knew what preceded* and she was in the clear so to speak.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that Max and Ruth laughed at the story for the same reasons?

DVORA: I think basically so, basically so because firstly, the situation was so similar that you couldn't help even if you were angry, you still couldn't help to see the humor in it ... It may have meant more to Max than it would to Ruth because to her you didn't have to explain. *The explanation had to be his ... on his part because she knew what preceded, she knew why she was angry. He didn't understand why, so he had to be explained why.*

INTERVIEWER: What about this story? Could you have told this story instead of the one about the man not washing his hands?

A wealthy nobleman goes on vacation and while he is away he phones back to the mansion to ask the servant how everything is going.

The servant says, "Everything is great, only your favorite dog died."

The master said, "How did that happen?"

He said, "Well he was trampled to death by the horses."

The master said, "How did that happen?"

The servant said, "Well, the horses stampeded when the barn caught fire."

He said, "How did the fire start?"

He said, "Well, they were burying your mother by candlelight when the barn caught fire."<sup>18</sup>

DVORA: No. It doesn't apply.

INTERVIEWER: ... when you say Ruth responded to the humor of the story, now then if you had told any other funny joke, would she have responded as well?

DVORA: I don't think so because she was in no mood for jokes.

INTERVIEWER: So then why did this joke ...

DVORA: ... it sort of hit home so directly. It was so typical of what is actually happening here and it clarified the situation. ...

INTERVIEWER: ... Max after he finished laughing, what did he do?

DVORA: The whole, you know, the air was so clear. It seemed like everybody relaxed. He didn't take the children. They didn't go anywhere and we just sort of kibitzed.

INTERVIEWER: Did he say anything?

DVORA: No. He laughed about it.

INTERVIEWER: And did he ...

DVORA: made no comments

INTERVIEWER: made no comments

<sup>18</sup> This story is AT 2040, "The Climax of Horrors", and this particular version is taken from Y. M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* (Hatboro, Pennsylvania, 1966), 474.

DVORA: Because I didn't want to dwell on it.

.....

DVORA: I think he really appreciated it. *We just didn't have to go into lectures and discussions and he didn't have to give all kinds of reasons for his behavior. It was a good thing.*

#### ANALYSIS OF THE PERFORMANCE AS A SOCIAL INTERACTION

This folklore event lends itself well to Goffman's analysis of interpersonal ritual behavior.<sup>19</sup> Goffman's model is based upon the premise that the morality of an interaction inheres in the obligation to cope. When the orderly flow of a normal interaction is disrupted by an 'incident', defined by Goffman as an event which increases the level of tension as a result of a breach of social norms, a corrective interchange is initiated which is supposed to terminate in the reestablishment of ritual equilibrium. The 'interchange' consists of four moves, a 'move' being everything conveyed by an actor during a turn at taking action:

- I. *Orderly Flow of Normal Interaction*  
Children want to go to the movies.  
Max promises to take the children to the movies.  
The children wait for Max to take them to the movies.
- II. *Incident* – breach of social norms which raises the level of tension.  
Max breaks his promise.
- III. *Corrective Interchange*
  - A. CHALLENGE – the participants take on the responsibility of calling attention to the misconduct.  
The children cry. They are disappointed. Ruth is angry and argues with Max.
  - B. OFFERING – the participants, typically the offender is given a chance to correct for the offense and reestablish the expressive order.  
Max makes a new promise to take the children to the movies.
  - C. ACCEPTANCE – the persons to whom the offering is made can accept it as a satisfactory means of reestablishing the expressive order.

<sup>19</sup> Goffman, "On Facework".

The family accepts Max's new promise to take them on an outing.

- D. THANKS – the forgiven person conveys a sign of gratitude to those who have given him the indulgence of forgiveness.

Max is grateful.

#### IV. *Equilibrium Reestablished*

It is this pattern of challenge, offering, acceptance, and thanks which re-occurred on many previous occasions when Dvora's younger brother Max broke his promise and thereby created an incident. The family presented their challenge to Max by expressing anger and disappointment, thus initiating the corrective interchange. Max then made an offering to them by giving his word that he would take the children on an outing some other time. In good faith, the family accepted his gesture. Harmony was thus restored until Max broke his new pledge and started the whole cycle over again. The night the parable was told, the family was fed up with Max's attempts to compensate for his broken promises. When he saw that Ruth would not accept a new offering, he tried to redefine the situation so as to plead innocent – "What have I done wrong?" – and thereby discredit the accusations directed against him. Ruth refused to accept Max's redefinition of the situation and attacked him again. Again, Max redefined his position. This pattern of Ruth accusing and Max making excuses was repeated over and over again until Ruth, furious with Max's refusal to face his offenses and unable to see any way out of the deadlocked routine of challenge and rationalization, ceased to cope any longer and withdrew from the interchange into silence. It is precisely at this point, where there appeared to be no way out of the disequilibrium – "because nobody's going to budge one inch" – that Dvora entered and told the parable.

Before Max could make an offering which Ruth would accept, he and Ruth had to reach a consensus regarding the definition of the situation. Perceiving this and wanting to be true to her own assessment of the matter, Dvora seized upon the parable as a 'challenge' which would appeal to everyone. First, it would affirm Ruth's evaluation. Second, the story was sufficiently indirect, appropriate, and humorous that Max, simply by laughing, could acknowledge that he understood the appropriateness of the analogy and accepted the definition of the situation it proposed. This was her way of making a 'challenge' to Max which he could not rationalize. Thus, the telling of the parable was ingeniously

integrated into the social interaction. It constituted a 'challenge' which served to reinstitute the corrective ritual on a new footing and bring it to a harmonious resolution.

When asked what effect the story had, Dvora explained that everyone laughed uproariously, much more so than she anticipated. Laughter brought the discussion to an end and left Max with no comeback. Further discussion would only have maintained the established frame and would have made it possible for the guilty one to respond with further rationalizations, thereby increasing the tension. The parable however introduced a new frame, in the form of a fictional story, momentarily distracted everyone's attention away from the painful dominant encounter while this subordinate one was briefly allowed to hold sway and by provoking laughter, neutralized the previously established frame of reference. While howling with laughter, Ruth could not remain annoyed and Max could not remain indignant. The parable constituted a displaced definition of the situation and, as Goffman points out, as it is safe to offend something no longer credited as reality, Ruth and Max were able to laugh at this depiction of the situation and Dvora achieved her aim. Max saw his behavior clearly and unemotionally and Ruth was appeased.<sup>20</sup>

#### APPROPRIATENESS OF THE PARABLE I

Since the parable and social situation only hold certain features in common, the shared features are an index to what the narrator considers relevant and appropriate in this instance. The most important elements which the parable and the life situation share are first, the peculiar nature of the corrective ritual with its repetition of 'challenge' and 'offering';

<sup>20</sup> Erving Goffman, in *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis, 1963), 60, says: "When an alteration in official rules of irrelevance occurs, we can, perhaps, say, as Freud argued, that the 'energy' previously employed to 'bind' the suppressions can be set 'free'. Further, the new rules of irrelevance – the new frame of reference [the parable] – often provide a context in which it is especially difficult to maintain the previous suppressions. And so the participants flood out in regard to a definition of the situation that has just been displaced, it being safe to offend something no longer credited as reality."

The laughter response, like open anger and crying, is a form of "flooding out" whereby individuals can no longer "sustain an appropriate expressive role in the current reaction" (*Ibid.*, 55). As soon as they start laughing, the actors cannot remain indignant or annoyed. 'Flooding out' is one way of breaking the frame and this is precisely the strategy which Dvora adopts, referring to it as "breaking the ice" and "easing the tension with a little humor".

and second, the manner in which the guilty person alludes to his offenses, or, the nature of his 'offering'.

#### A. *The Corrective Ritual*

The parable provides both a microcosm of the life situation and a projected resolution. In both the social encounter and the parable, the opening social frame consists of a guilty man recognizing but distorting the nature of his offenses when he goes to a superior to restore the equilibrium. Like the real life situation in which Max and Ruth were trapped, *the social interaction within the parable itself is a corrective ritual*. The fivefold incremental repetition of the 'challenge' and 'offering' moves of the corrective confessional ritual in the parable – the Rabbi asks, "How come?" and the parishioner answers, "Because..." – pinpoints the exact juncture in the real life situation where the corrective ritual came to an impasse. The parable serves as a projected resolution by showing the guilty man confess his sins in full to the Rabbi, the institutionalized channel for restoring equilibrium.

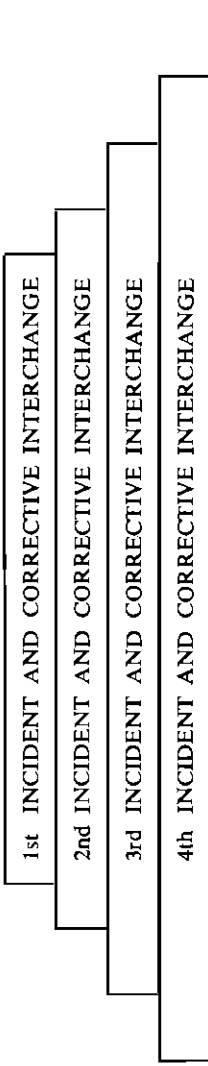
Chart 1 outlines both how the telling of the parable constitutes a 'challenge' move in the corrective ritual and how the parable reflects the peculiarities of the corrective ritual in the real life situation.

#### B. *The Nature of the Offender's Offering*

Offerings may take various forms: one may try to redefine the situation so as to minimize one's offenses; one may rationalize, place the blame on someone else or point out the extenuating circumstances. In the parable, the parishioner redefines his offenses so as to minimize his guilt. First, narrating his series of sins in reverse order both of seriousness and chronology, he starts his confession with the last sin he committed which is also the most trivial. Second, each time he confesses to a transgression, the Rabbi questions him regarding the extenuating circumstances. It emerges that what the parishioner offers as extenuating circumstances are really very serious transgressions themselves. Therefore the definition of the transgression in each new offering is not only incompatible with the definition of the transgression in the preceding challenge but also progressively more serious. The fivefold incremental repetition of the 'challenge' and 'offering' moves in the interchange in the parable represent the attempt of the Rabbi and the parishioner to come to a consensus on the nature and seriousness of the man's transgression. It

Chart 1

[The family negotiates many corrective interchanges. Each time Max created an incident by breaking a promise, the family expressed anger (challenge) and Max made a new promise (offering) which the family accepted (acceptance). Max was relieved and grateful (thanks).]



INCIDENT  
AS  
DEFINED  
BY THE  
PARABLE

5th INCIDENT: The night the parable was told, Max broke his promise yet again.

*Unsuccessful Corrective Interchange*

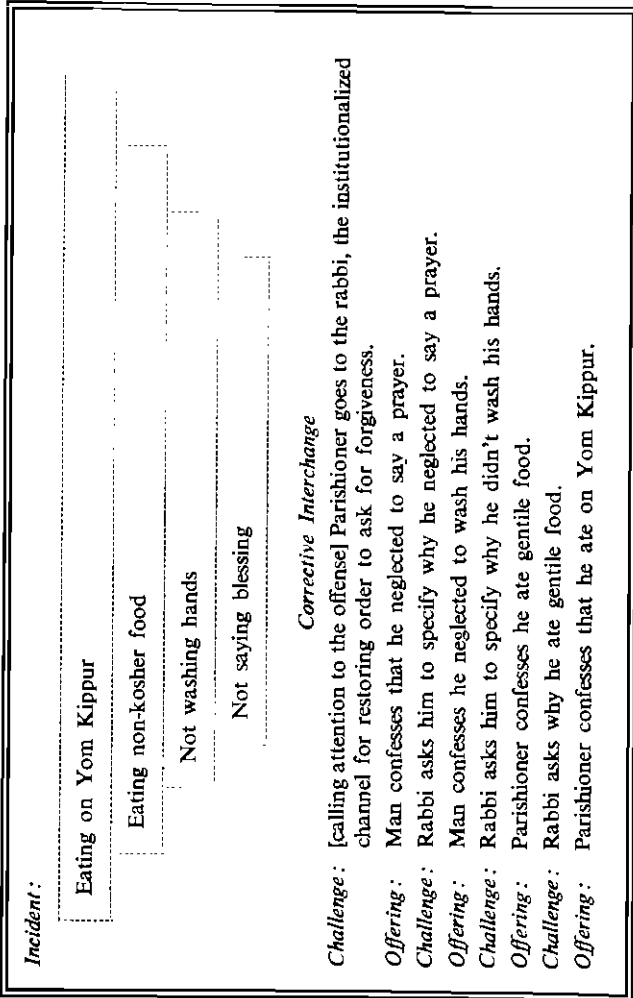
**CHALLENGE:** The children cry and Ruth expresses anger.  
**OFFERING:** Max makes a new promise but for an inappropriate time.  
**REJECTION:** Fed up with an endless series of corrective rituals which have been negotiated in the past without actually altering the offender's habit of committing the same offenses over and over again, the family refuses to accept Max's offer and rejects his invitation to go to the movies at a late hour.  
**OFFERING:** Disappointed and anxious to dissipate the family's ill feelings, Max makes a new offering by redefining his offense so as to minimize it. He tries to make their refusal of his offer to take them to a late show and their sustained anger appear unfair.  
**CHALLENGE:** Infuriated by Max's indignance and his refusal to admit to his whole series of broken promises, Ruth argues with him to try and make him realize he has done wrong and their anger is justified.  
**OFFERING:** Max rationalizes further, pleads innocent and tries to discredit their challenge against him.  
**CHALLENGE:** Ruth argues further to make Max realize why she is angry.

[This pattern of Challenge and Offering is repeated several times until Ruth withdraws from the interaction]

IMPASSE : DISEQUILIBRIUM : APPEAL TO AN ARBITRATOR

*New Corrective Interchange*

**CHALLENGE:** Dvora tells the parable.



CORRECTIVE  
RITUAL

**OFFERING:** Max laughs thereby acknowledging that he understood the appropriateness of the analogy and accepted the definition of the situation it proposed.  
**ACCEPTANCE:** Ruth laughs indicating that she is no longer angry and that she is aware that Max now understands what she was trying to explain.  
**THANKS:** Max ceases his rationalizations and participates in kibitzing with the family. He is relieved and grateful that harmony has been restored.

RESTORATION OF EQUILIBRIUM

is only after the man has confessed to the entire chain of transgressions in all their enormity that the corrective ritual can come to a harmonious conclusion. Thus, in the parable the genre of speaking is the 'confession' which is itself a special type of corrective ritual.

In both the parable and the real life situation, the offenders make a similar mistake. They both distort the relationship between the final apparently trivial offenses and the entire backlog of offenses so as to make the final offense appear as a single instance, thereby making the trivial look significant and the significant look trivial. In the parable the backlog of offenses is ordered in a hierarchical causal chain. The parishioner arranges his sins in reverse order of seriousness, in reverse chronological order and in order of effect to cause. In the real life situation, Max's offenses occurred in a cumulative rather than hierarchical chain, since each of Max's offenses is the same: he keeps breaking promises whereas in the parable, one sin is intrinsically more serious than another. This difference between the parable and the life situation however is unimportant since Dvora emphasized that it is the generalized logical structure of the parable which is relevant, that is, the error of thinking that a person can evaluate the final offense in its own right without any reference to preceding offenses, when in fact, its significance rests upon its being the last of a series.

#### APPROPRIATENESS OF THE PARABLE II

To further clarify text-context fit, let us consider how the informant responds to an alternate story which is structurally similar to the parable in some respects only. On the basis of the informant's response to the appropriateness of the alternate story, I will compare the parable, alternate story and social situation in order to reveal further features of relevance to the informant.

To determine how important the structure of the social interaction in the parable was to Dvora, I asked her if she could have substituted the tale about the wealthy nobleman whose servant tells him that his dog died when it was trampled by horses who stampeded when the barn caught fire during his mother's funeral. This tale employs a hierarchical chain identical in structure to the parable which Dvora used. Yet her response was "this story is not appropriate to Max's situation". When I analyzed and compared the parable and this tale, a striking dissimilarity appeared in the opening frame. In the Russian tale, a superior (nobleman) comes

to an inferior (servant) and is mistaken in expecting equilibrium. The servant *then breaks the news of the calamities which have befallen the property and kin of the master*. In contrast, both Dvora's parable and Max's situation stress that an inferior (the younger brother or parishioner) comes to a superior (older sister or Rabbi), recognizing but distorting the disequilibrium for which he is responsible, and *confesses his personal offenses*. Thus she considered the social situation in the opening frame and the structure of the social interaction conveyed in the parable essential features.

#### APPROPRIATENESS OF THE PARABLE III

The significance of a parable or proverb is not in the parable or proverb itself but in the meaning which particular participants give it in a specific context. Parables, like proverbs, are statements of group norms. And group norms may be defined as "ideas in the minds of members about what should and should not be done by a specific member under specific circumstances.... Because norms are ideas and are therefore subject to elaborate qualifications, they can specify the many fine distinctions necessary to accommodate different persons, times, occasions and circumstances."<sup>21</sup> In order to appreciate the range of group norms which this parable can be made to express and the appropriateness with which this parable can be applied to quite different situations, let us examine the following report by Jack Starkman<sup>22</sup> of how Mr. Heller once used this parable:

INTERVIEWER: O.K. What about, like, Dvora has a lot of stories that she heard from her mother. Say, the one about the man who didn't wash his hands on *Yonkiper* and went to the Rabbi to ask forgiveness.

JACK: Yea and this, this is, this is a classic, yea. It always applies because it was told to me here the same thing, so apparently it has accommodated many many generations, you see. I have heard it from a Mr. Heller who was a *mekh-ith* 'father of son-in-law or daughter-in-law' to my uncle, to my late uncle. You know, he was related by marriage. He was an extremely religious man. When I came home from work, we sat under the table and I was going to eat. So he says to me, this Mr. Heller, "My son, haven't you forgotten something?"

<sup>21</sup> Theodore M. Mills, *The Sociology of Small Groups* (Englewood Cliffs, 1967), 74.

<sup>22</sup> The narrator, Jack (Yankl) Starkman, was born in 1914 in Klimontow, Poland, and came to Canada in 1935. Mr. Heller told Jack this story in 1935. I recorded this text the evening of September 22, 1969, during an informal interview in my kitchen in Downsview, Ontario.

And I looked at him and I says, "What?"

He says, "You haven't washed your hands", for, for what you should do, wash, not like we usually wash our hands clean. I'd taken, I'd taken a shower previously. But he wanted me to wash my hands ritually, you know, just, a, this part of the fingers, the front part of the fingers. And uh, it is an *aveyre* 'transgression', you know, it is. ...

So I says, "But this is such a small thing. It doesn't matter."

So he says, "Our Torah tells us that *aveyre goreret aveyre* 'one transgression draws in its train another transgression'.<sup>23</sup> That means, a small sin be ...

INTERVIEWER: begets

JACK: Begets another one, a bigger one. And I still expressed skepticism.

So he says, "I'll tell you something, my son." And then the story that you, that you heard. The way he told it, it had perhaps a little bit more *shmalts* 'literally: fat [figuratively: elaboration]' to it.

He says, "This man came to the Rabbi *erev Yonkipper* 'eve of the Day of Atonement' just like today, you know, a day before."

And he says, "Rabbi, I have sinned. Please, I would like to ask you for some kind of forgiveness, for penance, if you can."

So he says, "My son. To forgive is God's, but let me hear what it is and perhaps I can help you."

So he says, "*Rebe* 'Rabbi' I for ... I finished a dinner and I'd forgot to say the closing prayer, at the dinner which is called *bentshn* 'saying the benediction after the meal'."

So the Rabbi says, "Well my son. It isn't a big *aveyre* 'transgression'. I'll give you a penance for it. But before I do that, would you mind telling me why you didn't *bentsh*. Of course you could have said the *brokhe* 'benediction'. It's a short time only."

So he says to the Rabbi, "I didn't *bentsh* because I didn't wash my hands prior and in the Torah, in the *peyrek* 'chapter in the Mishna [the Mishna is the collection of post biblical laws and rabbinical discussions of the second century B.C.]' there is a saying. 'If you'd forgotten to wash your hands then you don't have to *bentsh*.'<sup>24</sup> One is tied in with the other."

So he says, "Well, this is also not a very big *aveyre*, but why have you forgotten to wash your hands? Were you perhaps in a hurry?"

So he says, "No, *Rebe*, it wasn't that I was in a hurry but I was in an environment where it wasn't nice for me to wash my hands."

He says, "Where was that environment?"

So he says, "It was in a Christian restaurant."

Then he says, "This already sounds bad. Why did you eat in a Christian restaurant?" He says, "You could have gone to a Jewish restaurant."

He says, "All the Jewish restaurants happened to be closed that day."

<sup>23</sup> This proverb is from the Mishna, Avoth 4:2.

<sup>24</sup> This saying appears in the Talmud, Berakoth 53b, "dirty hands unfit one for grace". See p. 326 of the 1948 Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud. Technically, Torah is the Pentateuch. More broadly it is Jewish law and learning. The narrator is simply saying that his statements have an authoritative basis.

He says, "What was the day?"

He says, "It was *Yonkipper* and I had bacon and eggs in a *goyishe* 'gentile' restaurant."

So this is what Heller meant to tell me. That if you skip the little *aveyre* you're gradually building up to one huge *aveyre*. Naturally the Rabbi couldn't give him a penance on that I suppose. But yea, this must be a classic because it accompanied the generations and generations.

In the foregoing text, *the man to whom the parable was addressed reports upon the performance*. The parable was told to him as a warning in order to prevent him from committing greater transgressions in the future. In the parable the parishioner committed his greatest sin first. If he had not been eating on *Yonkipper*, he would not have had to go to a Christian restaurant where he had to eat non-kosher food and where because he could not observe the washing ritual he could not say the benediction. Nonetheless, Mr. Heller's point "that if you skip the little *aveyre* you're gradually building up to one huge *aveyre*", and the proverb, "One transgression draws in its train another transgression", indicate that Mr. Heller's focus is neither upon the particular chronological order of the sins committed in the parable, nor upon the nature of the parishioner's confession. Rather the general idea that one sin begets another (whether a large sin begets smaller sins or a small sin begets larger sins) is paramount especially because, in the parable, neglecting to wash one's hands ritually is the *last* and *least serious* sin in a series, whereas in the real life situation not washing one's hands is the *first* and only sin to have been committed. Thus the narrator is concerned with the notion that there are connections or links between one transgression and another, rather than with the order in which the sins occurred. In contrast, the essential points in Dvora's performance were first, the mistake of thinking that the final offense, which was also the least serious, could be evaluated in its own right without any reference to preceding offenses; second, the opening social frame in which a guilty man confesses his sins in reverse order of their seriousness and occurrence; and third, the focus of the social interaction in the parable upon the repetition of 'challenge' and 'offering'.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In this detailed study of how an individual actually used a parable on a particular occasion, I attempted to analyze folklore performance in its immediate context of use as a highly structured form of interpersonal behavior. Dvora integrated her storytelling performance into

the social interaction both by making her narration a move in the corrective ritual itself and by selecting a story which mirrored the precise point in the encounter where the corrective ritual had broken down. At the same time, her performance brought about the resolution which the parable itself had projected.

Consistent with the tenets of ethnoscience and the ethnography of communication,<sup>25</sup> I have given the cognitive processes of the narrator herself a central place in the analysis – what she considers relevant, what various courses of action were open to her and how she chose among them – in order to determine which of the alternate models that I could formulate to account for this performance most closely approximates the model which she used. The series of comparisons represent attempts both to dramatize Dvora's perception of her performance and to show how Malinowski's notion of the contextual specification of meaning applies to folklore performance. The situational analysis and the comparisons reveal that the significance of a parable is not in the story itself – the narrative is not an autonomous entity which encapsulates one kernel of wisdom or a single 'moral' – but in the particular and variable meaning which the participants give it in specific social contexts.

<sup>25</sup> See Joshua A. Fishman, ed., *Readings in the Sociology of Language* (The Hague, 1968); A. Kimball Romney and Roy Goodwin D'Andrade, eds., *Transcultural Studies in Cognition* (= *American Anthropologist* 66:3) (1964); Dell Hymes, ed., *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology* (New York, Evanston, and London, 1964); John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, eds., *The Ethnography of Communication* (= *American Anthropologist* 66:6) (1964); T. Gladwin and William C. Sturtevant, eds., *Anthropology and Human Behavior* (Washington, 1962).