Community and the Black Wedding:

An Examination of a Jewish Ritual's Historical Context and Development

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the Black Wedding, a Jewish folk ritual which attempts to ward off an epidemic by selecting two disenfranchised people, on the periphery of the community, and marrying them to each other in a graveyard. The thesis will first analyze the Jewish context of this practice, then its broader, non-Jewish context. Finally, it will examine accounts of Black Weddings from different historical periods, concluding with a close reading of a Hasidic story.

There is a longstanding Jewish awareness of boundaries, often related to the holy and the unholy. The disenfranchised were often seen as sources of plague. By incorporating them into the community through a Black Wedding, boundaries were redrawn to preserve communal sanctity.

This Jewish practice emerged in a cross-cultural environment where marriage blurred the boundaries between life and death. The Black Wedding drew on both Jewish and non-Jewish beliefs and customs and was intended to protect non-Jewish neighbours as well.

Historical accounts of the Black Wedding show the gradual acceptance of this originally controversial practice, and its use by leaders seeking authority, especially Hasidic Rebbes. The Hasidic story which is the focus of the final chapter illustrates the range of meanings that the Black Wedding eventually took on, going as far as a sense of cosmic reconciliation.

This thesis builds on the work of Natan Meir, Jeremy Brown, and Hanna Węgrzynek who have recently contributed to the scholarship regarding the Black Wedding and the development of this Jewish folk ritual. This study also draws on the theoretical work of Mary Douglas, Arnold van Gennep, and Michael Satlow who have contributed scholarship on rituals and boundaries. In bringing these scholars together, this thesis contributes to the ongoing discourse regarding folk religious practices and how they continue to develop and evolve through historical accounts and memory.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to my advisor, Dr. Justin Jaron Lewis, for his help and patience in bringing this work to fulfillment. From the planning stages to the final manuscript, he has been a constant source of inspiration and support who has allowed me the freedom and flexibility to explore my ideas. He has taught me to love and see the value of stories in religious practice.

I would like to thank the members of my committee. Dr. Elizabeth Alexandrin and Dr. Arthur Walker-Jones whose notes and feedback allowed me to flesh out my ideas while maintaining coherent thoughts. I would also like to thank Dr. Itay Zutra for his support in giving me resources for the Black Wedding. I would like to thank the University of Manitoba as an eternally grateful recipient of the University of Manitoba Graduate Fellowship, and the Department of Religion for its financial support as I worked and completed this project.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends who gave me their time and patience allowing me to share my ideas and sharpen them. To my mom, for all her love and support. To my aunt, for calling-in and checking-in on me. To my friends Cami and Ethan, who gave me thoughtful clear critiques to better develop my arguments. To my dad for understanding the feelings and emotions of a graduate student and giving me calm guidance when I doubted myself. Last to my Grandpa McLeod; I know he would be proud of me and this work.

Introduction

The Black Wedding (*shvartse khasene*, in Yiddish), or plague wedding (*mageyfe khasene*) is an unusual Jewish wedding practice performed during times of epidemic. This practice first emerged with the devastating cholera epidemics of the nineteenth century, primarily in Poland (which was then divided between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires). Communities that desired to hold this wedding did so with the intent of protecting the community from the disease. They would select a bride and groom, usually orphans but sometimes including people living with disabilities or marginalized in other ways. The wedding would take place in a cemetery. The community would provide everything for the wedding, including supporting the newlywed couple after the wedding. In return, it was believed that the epidemic would leave the community.

This thesis will analyze the Black Wedding as a Jewish folk ritual practice intended to preserve social equilibrium amongst Jews and vis-à-vis non-Jews. Jewish folk rituals drew their development from both Jewish and non-Jewish practices and customs. Utilizing the example of the Black Wedding, this thesis argues that rituals develop and change meaning over time in a space that is equally informed by the inside and outsider communities.

With this in mind, this thesis will first ask: what was the Jewish context for the development of the Black Wedding? Examining the social milieu of the earliest examples of the Black Wedding, we also see that the Black Wedding was performed with a non-Jewish presence in mind. This leads to the further question: what were the non-Jewish contexts for the development of the Black Wedding? These two questions provide a foundation for reading accounts of the Black Wedding, and for asking a final question: what is happening in the Black Wedding that other scholars have missed?

Research Interest

My interest in this topic sprang from COVID-19 and an interest in religious responses to epidemics. I was also interested in finding how religious stories are reinterpreted and recontextualized in different historical periods. In my general searching for historical Jewish responses to epidemics, I found several popular articles from 2020 about Black Weddings.[1] Some of these articles included references to a Black Wedding that happened in Winnipeg in the early twentieth century, which this thesis examines in more detail in the third chapter. Reading these articles, I was disappointed in how they treated the Black Wedding as a novelty. They expressed amazement at the fact that a Black Wedding was held in Israel in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from the work of Jeremy Brown, Natan Meir, and Hanna Węgrzynek, the Black Wedding has not been seriously studied outside of the COVID-19 context. It has been treated as a historical peculiarity through which lessons about our own times can be learned. This thesis seeks to give the Black Wedding a serious discussion as a transformative ritual.

This thesis developed in a backward to forward approach. This means that the third chapter produced the first and second chapters. As my interest in religious stories grew, I read a Hasidic story, discussed in the third chapter, that features a Black Wedding. From this story, I became interested in the intersection of historical accounts, memory, and how a ritual works in the liminal spaces between history and memory.

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[1] Rokhl Kafrissen, "Plague Weddings," *Tablet Magazine*, March 12, 2020, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/plague-weddings; "Corona Weddings: In the Cemetery, In yards, On rooftops and On the street," *Ynet,* last modified March 19, 2020, https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5697125,00.html; Coronavrius Wedding In…. A Cemetery," *Anash*. Accessed June 1, 2025. https://anash.org/coronavirus-wedding-in-a-cemetery/; Susannah Heschel. "A wedding in a cemetery: Judaism, terror, and pandemic," *The Immanent Frame*, accessed June 1, 2025. https://tif.ssrc.org/2020/06/18/a-wedding-in-a-cemetery/

Primary Sources on the Black Wedding

From its inception, the Black Wedding has been a source of fascination, appearing in newspaper reports, Hasidic tales, and Yiddish literature. Several memorial books, compiled after the holocaust, mention the practice of the Black Wedding. The Black Wedding was also utilized as a literary feature in the 20th century, often as a way of emphasizing the weirdness of characters or a place.

Both Jeremy Brown and Natan Meir, whose scholarship is discussed below, cite many accounts of Black Weddings, as well as weddings with some elements of the Black Wedding. This thesis, especially in chapter 3, will focus in on a number of these accounts, representing different historical periods, genres, and details of interest. They are listed here in chronological order of the events described:

A Hasidic story set in 1785, involving Rebbe Elimelekh of Lizhensk, published in 1910.[2]

A Hasidic story set in 1831, about Rebbe Tsvi of Rymanów, published in 1888.[3]

A brief mention of a Black Wedding in Krakow in 1849, in the memoirs of a non-Jewish Polish author, Wiktor Kopff (1805-1889), published in 1906.[4]

A Hasidic story set, apparently, in 1865-1866, about Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz, published in 1911.[5] This will be discussed in depth in chapter three.

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[2] Jeremy Brown, *The Eleventh Plague: Jews and Pandemics from the Bible to COVID-19.* Oxford: Oxford Universtiy Press, 2022, 185.

[3] Natan M. Meir. *Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800-1939.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020*,* 93-94.; Tsvi Hirsh Rymanower, *Sefer be'erot ha-mayim* (Przemyśl, 1894), 174.

[4] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 95; Wiktor Kopff, *Wspomnienia z ostatnich lat Rzeczypospolitej Krakows Akiej* (Kraków : Druk. "Czasu," 1906), 138.

[5] Translated in Justin Jaron Lewis, *Imagining Holiness* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 27-31.

Two articles from Yiddish newspapers in 1866, reporting on Black Weddings. [6]

A story of a Black Wedding in Opatów (in Yiddish, Apt) in 1892. This is a retelling by Mayer Kirshenblatt (published 2007), based on an account in the memorial book for the Jewish community of Apt published in 1966.[7]

A recollection of a Black Wedding in Płońsk in 1894, by Holocaust survivor Motel Michaelzohn, published in the memorial book for the Jewish community of Płońsk in 1963.[8]

Two newspaper reports, published on the same day and the following day, of a Black Wedding in Winnipeg, during the Spanish Flu epidemic, on November 11, 1918.[9]

Evidently many of these examples involve long time lapses between event and story, and issues of telling and retelling, but even the first-hand newspaper accounts are as imaginative as they are historical. Given that none of these sources can be treated as strictly factual, this thesis will also draw on modern Yiddish fiction. Mendele Mocher Seforim's novel *Fishke the Lame*, first published in 1869 and set in that period, features preparations for a Black Wedding and observations about Jewish marriages in general. A short story about a Black Wedding by Joseph Opatoshu, published in 1929, is suggestive about the scapegoating element of the ritual.[10]

The sources utilized balance historical accounts, accounts of memory, and how they shape a ritual like the Black Wedding.

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[6] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague,*195; Menakhem Nakhum b' ha-rov Yerakhmiel, "Misterei (di geheymnise) krementshug," *Kol mevaser*, July 26, 1866, 420.

[7] Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *They Called me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish childhood In Poland before the Holocaust.* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2007) P. 13-15

[8] Motl Michalzohn, "The Cholera Epidemic and the Wedding in the Cemetery in the Summer of 1894," in Sefer *Plonsk veha-Seviva*, ed. Shlomo Tsemach (Tel Aviv, Israel: Lidor, 1963) 135-136.

[9] "Hebrews Hold 'Wedding of Death' to Halt 'Flu,'" *Winnipeg Evening Tribune,* November 11, 1918. https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm:1690755. "Sacrificial Wedding to Stay the Plague." *Winnipeg Free Press* , November 12, 1918 . https://access-newspaperarchive-com.uml.idm.oclc.org/marriage-clipping-nov-12-1918-5088757/

[10] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 218. An English translation of this story, by Jeffrey Shandler, can be found at https://jewishcurrents.org/a-wedding-in-the-cemetery.

Scholarship on Black Weddings

This thesis will foreground and build on the scholarship of Natan Meir,[11] Hanna Węgrzynek,[12] and Jeremy Brown[13] on the Black Wedding.

Natan Meir's *Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800-1939* is the most recent significant research on the Black Wedding. An entire chapter is dedicated to the history of the Black Wedding in the 19th century and its potential origins. Meir analyzes the Black Wedding as a scapegoat ritual, using the marginalized as scapegoats for the difficulties Jewish communities faced, between natural disease and the disease that was anti-Jewish violence. The Black Wedding was a product of the 19th century to address anxiety about modernity, disguised as an ancient ritual.[14] This view also comes with an understanding that all Jewish people were scapegoats in some capacity. That is, the Jewish populace could be blamed for any malady affecting the non-Jewish population. Though there was a hierarchy within the Jewish community, even the most powerful member of the community could become a scapegoat for outsiders. According to Meir, this has led to a continued fascination, among later Jews, with the marginal Jewry of Eastern Europe.[15]

Hanna Węgrzynek's chapter "Shvartze Khasene" in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe* examines the cultural roots of the Black Wedding in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Her work will be examined more in depth in the second chapter. She examines both Slavic Christian practices and Jewish practices as a means of challenging the

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[11] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*.

[12] Hanna Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2011)

[13] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague.*

[14] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 8, 116.

[15] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 3.

assumed boundaries between Jews and Christians, and pointing out the limitations of Jewish isolation. However, she argues that it is challenging to disentangle origins of customs, since cultures influenced and informed each other. She notes, "Jewish culture in east central Europe may be said to resemble a fabric in which horizontal (i.e., non-Jewish) threads intersected with vertical (i.e., Jewish) ones."[16] The Black Wedding serves as an example of these influences.

Jeremy Brown's *The Eleventh Plague: Jews and Pandemics from the Bible to COVID-19* presents a survey of Jewish responses to epidemics throughout Jewish history. He focuses some of his attention on the Black Wedding, which he terms a plague wedding, by examining the Black Wedding that happened in Israel in 2020 and contextualizing it with Black Weddings of the past. He does this by examining the geographic reach of Black Weddings and various other responses Jewish people had to these epidemics.[17] Brown's work is valuable for the sheer number of sources he has traced regarding accounts of the Black Wedding. He calls the plague wedding an act of "utter desperation" that has become an object of fascination and curiosity.[18]

Sources on Background and Context

Scholarly sources that do not directly address the Black Wedding are important for context on Jewish life in Eastern Europe, the co-territorial non-Jewish cultures, and the cholera disease.

On Jewish life in Eastern Europe, I have especially utilized the post-holocaust memory ethnography of Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog,[19] and the more recent scholarship of

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[16] Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," 64.
[17] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague,*179.
[18] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague,*179.
[19] Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1952).

Michał Galas,[20] Annamaria Orla-Bukowska,[21] Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern,[22] John D. Klier,[23] and David G. Roskies,[24] all of whom challenge Zborowski and Herzog's portrayal of self-contained Jewish communities. Power dynamics around and within Jewish communities are clarified in Benjamin Nathan's *Beyond the Pale*.[25] The religious politics of the Ashkenazi immigrant community in Winnipeg are described in Allan Levine's history of Manitoba Jewry.[26]

To understand the Black Wedding's similarities and differences with normative Eastern European Jewish weddings, I have turned to survey articles by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett[27] and by ChaeRan Freeze,[28] as well as the memoirs of Yehiel Yeshayahu Trunk as quoted by Daniel Boyarin.[29] To clarify how elements of Black Weddings conflicted with traditional Jewish law, I have cited some classic Jewish texts including the Talmud and Shulhan Arukh.

The marginalization of Jews in general, with a focus on the body, is explored by Sander Gilman.[30] The role of marginalized people in the Eastern European Jewish imagination is

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[20] Michał Galas "Inter-Religious Contacats in the Shtetl: Proposals for Future Research," in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry,* ed. Antony Polonsky (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 42.

[21] Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, "Maintaining Borders, Crossing Borders: Social Relationships in the Shtetl." In *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry Volume 17: The Shtetl: Myth and Reality*, edited by Antony Polonsky, 188. Liverpool University Press, 2004. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv4cbg9j.

[22] Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[23] John Klier, "What Exactly was a Shtetl?," in *The Shtetl Image and Reality: Papers of the Second Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish,* ed. Gennady Estraikh and Mikail Krutikov (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2017) 25.

[24] David Roskies, "The Shtetl as Imagined Community," in *The Shtetl Image and Reality: Papers of the Second Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish,* ed. Gennady Estraikh and Mikail Krutikov (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2017), 7.

[25] Benjamin Nathan. *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia.* Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

[26] Allan Levine. *Coming of Age: A History of the Jewish People of Manitoba.* (Winnipeg, MB: Heartland Associates, 2009), 135-139.

[27] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Weddings", *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe,* https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/2149

[28] ChaeRan Freeze, "Marriage", *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe,* https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/2116.

[29] Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 70.

[30] Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 40.

illuminated by a look at Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's story of the Seven Beggars, as interpreted by storyteller/folklorist Howard Schwartz. [31]

On cholera and its social history, I consulted Christopher Hamlin's *Cholera: The Biography*[32] Peter Baldwin's *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830-1930*,[33] and an article by Asa Briggs.[34]

On Slavic practices, I draw on work from Christine D. Worobec,[35] Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva,[36] Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby,[37] and Margaret Bessinger[38] on normative Russian wedding practices from the nineteenth century. I also utilize studies by Gheorghita Geana[39] and Gail Kligman on what Kligman calls a wedding for the dead, practiced in Romania,[40] and an article by Nicolae Babuts on a ballad related to this ritual.[41] Vesna Petreska provides an article on the "Plague's Wedding" practiced in Macedonia.[42]

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[31] Nachman of Breslov, "The Seven Beggars," short story translated by Aryeh Kaplan, in *The Seven Beggars: & Other Kabbalistic Tales of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov* (Woodstock, VA: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 1–84. Howard Schwartz, *A Palace of Pearls: The Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 142-143.

[32] Chistopher Hamlin, *Cholera: The Biography.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50.

[33] Peter Baldwin. "Enter Cholera." In *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830-1930*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[34] Asa Briggs, "Cholera and Society in the Nineteenth Century," *Past & Present* 19 no. 1, (1961) doi:10.1093/past/19.1.76.

[35] Christine D. Worobec. *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period,* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991)

[36]Laura J. Olson, and Svetlana Adonyeva. *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013)

[37] Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby. *Village Values: Negotiating Identity, Gender, and Resistance in Urban Russian Life-Cycle Rituals* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2008) 46.

[38] Margaret H. Betssinger, "Nature as Metaphor in Romanian and Slavic Ritual Wedding Poetry," *Philologica Jassyensia* 31, no. 1 (2020): 188. EBSCOhost.

[39] Gheorghita Geana, "The Mioritic Wedding: A Creative Ritual Solution to an Existential Crisis," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016).

[40] Gail Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead,* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

[41] Nicolae Babuts. "A metaphoric Intercession in Miorita and the Arges Monastery." *Philologica Jassyensia* 21, no. 1 (2015): 17, EBSCOhost.

[42] Vesna Petreska. "Deaf Wedding: The Time in the Beliefs and Ritual Practices of the Female Folk Healers/Wizards." *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta* 65, no. 2 2017.

Theoretical Sources

In addition to Natan Meir's analysis of the Black Wedding, this thesis is informed by Shaul Magid's discussion of Jewish antinomianism,[43] the ritual study work of Mary Douglas,[44] Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage,[45] and the thought of René Girard on violence.[46]

Magid categorizes various forms of antinomianism, not all of which are in outright opposition to law or norms. This will clarify how the Black Wedding could ignore some traditional norms while reinforcing others.

Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* attempts to understand how religions organize purity and impurity to create an ordered system for life. She notes the subjectivity of what is considered impure. Something like dirt, for example, is a subjective concept that nevertheless orders our experiences.[47] In her chapter "External Boundaries," she takes on the idea of the human body as an extension of the boundaries of society. "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious."[48] She cites the example of a woman's body determining the caste of the child.[49] Her idea on the body is expanded by Michael Satlow, who sees marriage as a form of boundary maintenance between communities.[50]

Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* provides a foundation for the relationship between life, death, and transitions through rituals. In van Gennep's system this involves three phases.

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[43] Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margins*, (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).
[44] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* (London: Routledge, 2003).
[45] Arnold van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,* trans by. Monkia B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).
[46]Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
[47] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 2.
[48] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 116.
[49] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 126.
[50] Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity.* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 2001), 265.

First, separation; second, a space of liminality; third, reincorporation.[51] This structure allows us to see the Black Wedding as functioning to incorporate formerly marginalized members (the couple selected to be married) into the Jewish community. Van Gennep's idea of rites of passage will be examined more thoroughly in the second chapter, as part of showing how the Black Wedding could be informed by a broader geographic scope than imagined in previous scholarship.

Meir, drawing on the earlier ethnographic work of Naftuli Vaynig, analyzes the Black Wedding as a substitution sacrifice. To elucidate this idea further I will draw on the classic scholarship of Joshua Trachtenberg.[52] René Girard's seminal work *Violence and the Sacred* deepens this understanding. Violence is a natural part of society and there needs to be an outlet through which violence can be mitigated. Girard believes that sacrifice provides this outlet.[53] Girard's work shows how the sacrificial victim becomes a focal point for the violence of the community. Through this violence on a single scapegoat, the violence of the community is abated.[54] This violence has a way of both demonizing and eventually incorporating the scapegoat into the community.[55]

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's concept of "invented tradition," introduced in their edited volume from 1983, *The Invention of Tradition*, is essential for understanding the Black Wedding as a practice that seems to have been perceived as ancient since it began in the early nineteenth century. Hugh Trevor-Roper's chapter in that volume, focusing on Scotland, is particularly relevant to the Black Wedding as a force for social stability in times of unsettling

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[51] van Gennep. *Rites of Passage*, 11.

[52] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, [1939] 2004).

[53] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 19.

[54] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* , 8.

[55] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 303.

change.[56] Robert Blauner's paper "Death and Social Structure" contextualizes death-related rituals, specifically, within the social upheavals of modernity.[57] An article by Kristian Gerner has been helpful for thinking about the complexities of cross-cultural interactions and influences.[58]

Underlying this thesis, though not directly cited, is *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Yerushalmi shows that historiography was not a significant practice in Jewish thought until the 19th century. As such memory was preserved better through ritual and recitation.[59] Following this line of thought, documents such as newspaper articles are helpful in providing us a base for the historical experience, but I will also explore fictional and religious stories to better understand the meaning behind the ritual of the Black Wedding.

My Contribution

Meir's, Brown's, and Węgrzynek's scholarship provides a valuable launching point for further research into the Black Wedding, its development, its historical scope and its meaning. Meir's work provides the richest understanding of the Black Wedding as a ritual of relationships between the enfranchised members of Jewish society and the disenfranchised members. Building on Meir's analysis of the Black Wedding as a scapegoat ritual, this thesis will examine the Black Wedding as a negotiation between different communities. Unlike a normal wedding which involved negotiations between families, the Black Wedding involved a contractual obligation

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[56] Hugh Trevor-Roper. "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*, 15-41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[57] Robert Blauner, "Death and Social Structure." *Psychiatry* 29 no.4 (1966): 378–94. doi:10.1080/00332747.1966.11023480.381.

[58] Kristian Gerner. "Ethnic Triangles, Assimilation, and the Complexities of Acculturation in a Multi-ethnic Society." *Polin Studies in Polish Jewry* 31 (2019). https://muse.jhu.edu/article/713493.

[59] Yosef Hayim Yerushalami, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory.* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1996) 11.

between the community and the Divine, and between Jewish and non-Jewish communities. In this case, the couple being married did not matter as much as the fact that the ritual was done. Building on Meir's view that the Black Wedding was a type of sacrificial wedding, [60] I see the "town son-in-law" and "town daughter-in-law" (the couple married in a Black Wedding) as sacrificial offerings to appease the divine and broader communities, more than as actual individual agents marrying each other.

A limit of Meir's work is that he seemingly hesitates to explore the Black Wedding as something beyond a strictly Jewish practice. When exploring the development of the ritual, he sees it as fully Jewish. Drawing such a conclusion, however, ultimately ignores the fact that communities do not live in a vacuum and that Black Wedding narratives often speak of an awareness of non-Jewish neighbours. The Black Wedding was a practice done by Jewish people but it was not solely a Jewish practice.

Hanna Węgrzynek's work is valuable for exploring the non-Jewish roots of the development of the Black Wedding. She takes an appropriately conservative approach, looking solely at the Slavic context in the region where a majority of Black Weddings occurred. However, the broader borders of the Slavic world offer a rich tapestry of folk ritual practices with similarities to the Black Wedding that are worthy of exploration. This thesis will expand the borders of the Black Wedding's regional influences to see that, within a larger cultural context, the Black Wedding was a normal folk response to mass death in the community.

More broadly, this thesis intends to push the boundaries of examining folk religious practices and religious identities. Judaism is often imagined as a religious identity drawn from Jewish scriptures. The development of the Black Wedding, however, does not reflect a tradition

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[60] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 114.

entirely based on reading documents and drawing conclusions, but instead one based on day-to-day life, seeing and interacting with people within the community and outside of the community. The Jewishness of the Black Wedding is also part of its larger cultural home in the Slavic world. This thesis intends to show that sources of the religious self, including in "folk religion," are drawn from multiple points that deserve to be further explored.

This thesis also implicitly challenges the term "folk religion" itself. Rather than the being the simple actions of the poorly informed, folk religious practices are produced through intense negotiation within and beyond the community, responding to different needs. These practices, like normative religious practices, are the long-term results of negotiations happening between different communities. They are in fact in continual negotiation and when we see a practice like the Black Wedding we seeing the middle of a conversation within a wide landscape of views.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter of this thesis, titled "Jewish Context," asks the question, what was the world the Jewish people lived in when the Black Wedding was developed? This chapter revolves around the social structure and dynamics of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish communities. In this context, I look at typical patterns of courtship, wedding ceremonies, and marriage, and compare them with the Black Wedding. The distinctiveness of the Black Wedding, including some antinomian tendencies, made it controversial. However, this chapter will show how the Black Wedding's appearance of breaking social norms in fact acted as a means of preserving the social structure of the community, both somewhat redrawing and maintaining boundaries.

A main argument of the first chapter is that Jewish communities were not isolated but in constant interaction with non-Jewish communities. In this light, the second chapter, "Non-Jewish

Context," builds on the work of Hanna Węgrzynek who examined Eastern Slavic influences on the Black Wedding.[61] This chapter will push the boundaries farther east and south from the work of Węgrzynek. It is here that van Gennep's work on rites of passage, already mentioned in the first chapter, is most relevant. The world surrounding the development of the Black Wedding was one ripe with connections between death and marriage. Rather than claiming to pinpoint non-Jewish practices that the Black Wedding could have been modelled on, this thesis uses the term "cultural osmosis" to describe influences in this context of intercultural communication and shared concerns and beliefs.

The first two chapters develop our hermeneutical tools for reading and interpreting accounts of the Black Wedding. The final chapter of this thesis is titled "Accounts of Black Weddings." Why save these accounts for last? Partly to first establish ideas about the ritual, which will have an impact on interpreting accounts of the ritual. Another reason is the recognition of the difference between memory and history. Accounts from different historical periods provide an understanding of the Black Wedding as an evolving practice understood in different ways. This chapter will conclude by examining a Hasidic tale that allows for a full, multifaceted understanding of the meanings of the Black Wedding.

[61] Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene,"

Chapter I - Jewish Context

Through an exploration of the Black Wedding, consideration must be given to the influence of the community. This is a challenging task, and this chapter will not exhaust every avenue. This is partly because there are so many aspects worth exploring. Therefore, I will narrow my focus to the living context from which the Black Wedding arose: the Eastern European Jewish communities, often remembered as the *Shtetl* (small market-town). The Shtetl has captured the imagination of Jewish communities, both past and present. This chapter aims to paint a picture of the Shtetl and depict what life was like there. The Black Wedding was not practiced solely in small market-towns; it was practiced broadly across Eastern Europe in large cities as well. But the Shtetl is a metonym to help us think about this broader Eastern European Jewish context.

I have chosen to focus first on the lived experience of the community rather than on scriptural sources because this reflects daily life more accurately. After exploring the day-to-day life, I will examine examples of other, more normative weddings that took place in the Shtetl to highlight what makes the Black Wedding distinct.

The distinct elements of the Black Wedding were controversial from its beginnings. Looking at these controversies leads into a consideration of whether and to what extent the Black Wedding is an antinomian practice. Building on the ideas of Natan Meir, I see the Black Wedding not as fundamentally challenging community norms, but as an offering for the community. The notion of the Black Wedding as a sin-offering aligns with Mary Douglas' thesis that group anxiety can be transferred onto the body:

> The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures.[62]

If this is the body politic, the marginalized are on the periphery of the body. The Black Wedding then reflects an awareness of the periphery of the body.

In conclusion, this chapter intends to show that the Jewish context of the Black Wedding involved maintaining boundaries within the Jewish community as well as boundaries between the Jewish and non-Jewish community. The marginalized were on the periphery of society. The Black Wedding acted as a ritualistic means of penetrating the boundaries between the inside of the community (those incorporated in the day-to-day actions of the Jewish community) and those who stood on the outside (orphans and people with disabilities). Through the Black Wedding, there was a means of redeeming certain peripheral couples by bringing them into the inside of the community. This idea will be explored in the latter half of the chapter, building on the scholarship of Mary Douglas and Michael Satlow.[63]

This chapter will argue that the Black Wedding serves as a form of boundary maintenance for the Shtetl, reinforcing its identity both inwardly and with the outside world.

The Shtetl

The Shtetl, a small market-town with a largely or predominantly Jewish population, was the kind of community many Jewish people lived in during the eighteenth and nineteenth

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[62] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 116.
[63] Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity,*

centuries in Eastern Europe. The memory of the Shtetl as an isolated Jewish enclave evokes strong associations with Eastern European Jewish life. The Shtetl brings up the stereotypical idea of Tevye the Dairyman (from Sholem Aleichem's short stories written at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, and the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* later based on them), or Fishke the Lame, among other well-known figures from literature and drama. However, this romanticized portrayal has been re-examined by scholars. The dominant Jewish collective memory imagines Jewish communities as isolated from their non-Jewish neighbours. This idea was popularized by Mark Zborowsky and Elizabeth Herzog in *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl*. They write near the end of their preface,

> The themes which had characterized the Ashkenazi community of Western Europe continued to develop: isolation from the non-Jewish world and complete penetration of religious precept and practice into every detail of daily life. … The small town, the Shtetl, was the stronghold of this culture.[64]

While Zborowski and Herzog acknowledge some level of contact between Jews and non-Jews, they emphasize that the Jewish identity remained firmly rooted in the Yiddish language in the home and outside, and Hebrew within the synagogue. The physical space of the Shtetl underscores this close-knit Jewish community.

However, recent scholarship has challenged this image. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern notes that non-Jewish contemporaries of the nineteenth century had terms for the Shtetl: "Poles called a [Shtetl] *miasteczko*, the Unkrainians a *mitstechko*, and the Russains a *mestechko*, Slavic for a

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[64] Zborowski and Herzog, *Life is with the People,* 34.

small market town."[65] This in itself undermines the notion of the Shtetl as an exclusively Jewish phenomenon.

David G. Roskies has examined the Shtetl as an imagined community: a state of mind, a perception shaped by nostalgia and morality. The only differences between a town and a Shtetl were terminology and imagination. It was only after the destruction of the Shtetl in the holocaust that concrete boundaries were imposed on its definition. By the 1960s, the Shtetl, as presented by Zborowsky and Herzog, had become a romanticized fiction designed to help reconstruct Jewish identity. Roskies sought to deconstruct this image of the Shtetl in his work, *The Shtetl Book*, co-authored with Diane K. Roskies. Unlike the imagined Shtetl of nostalgia, their book presents a more tangible and historically grounded portrayal. This includes images of Christian churches and non-Jewish communities, reflecting the reality of interethnic coexistence. Roskies describes *The Shtetl Book* as a postmodernist project that blends genres.[66] This blending of genres speaks to the ambiguous idea of the Shtetl, and the Black Wedding.

Scholarship on the Shtetl has largely shifted from the idea of an isolated community to one that is informed by both Jewish and non-Jewish contexts. Along these lines, the work of Hanna Węgrzynek establishes overlapping similarities between the Black Wedding and non-Jewish practice; yet Węgrzynek and other scholars are hesitant about acknowledging non-Jewish influences. Scholarship on the Shtetl, however, shows the exchanging of ideas and ritual notions.

For example, Annamaria Orla-Bukowska has found that Jews and non-Jewish people regularly interacted. She writes that physical boundaries between the communities were often

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[65] Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl,* 12.

[66] David Roskies, "The Shtetl as Imagined Community," in *The Shtetl Image and Reality: Papers of the Second Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish,* ed. Gennady Estraikh and Mikail Krutikov (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2017) 7.

mutable. For example, when a public space became a Jewish space for a Jewish wedding, non-Jewish guests were sometimes invited. “Weddings and other festivities of a religious origin became occasions to strengthen ties, especially with the nearest neighbors.”[67] Weddings served as a means of building social bonds. During times of social breakdown, weddings could help reinforce these connections. She writes that middle-class Jews were the most intent on maintaining social boundaries, whereas both the elite and lower classes tended to have more interaction with their non-Jewish neighbours, often due to shared socio-economic interests.[68]

While there were still clearly defined boundaries, they were at times porous and liminal. Non-Jewish neighbours knew Jewish practices and vice-versa. For example, Orla-Bukowska writes that both groups were careful to respect the boundaries between each other’s religions. Nevertheless, she presents a case where a Russian Orthodox maid taught a Jewish child their first Hebrew blessings and prayers.[69] Ironically, this was done to maintain the strict division between Jewish and Christian practices. However, upon closer examination, this example reveals an unexpectedly intimate knowledge of Hebrew, which it would not have been entirely necessary for the maid to understand. Even if this was merely a simple blessing, the evidence suggests a point of “cultural osmosis.” Both groups show evidence of understanding each other’s practices.

Thus, the work of Roskies and others recognizes that Jewish and non-Jewish people were more integrated than earlier scholarship had suggested. Despite the portrayal of imagined communities by Zborowsky and Herzog, there was regular cultural exchange between Jewish and non-Jewish populations. According to John D. Klier,

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[67] Orla-Bukowska. “Maintaining Borders, Crossing Borders: Social Relationships in the Shtetl,” 188.

[68] Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, “Maintaining Borders, Crossing Borders: Social Relationships in the Shtetl.” In *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry Volume 17: The Shtetl: Myth and Reality*, edited by Antony Polonsky, 188. Liverpool University Press, 2004. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv4cbg9j.

[69] Orla-Bukowska. “Maintaining Borders, Crossing Borders: Social Relationships in the Shtetl,” 179.

> The Jews were never isolated from the non-Jewish population. Even those townlets which had a Jewish majority existed to serve the non-Jews who flocked to them on a weekly basis. Many more Jews lived side by side with the Christian population in the towns or countryside.[70]

Michał Galas adds the observation that in several postcards of Shtetls images of churches could of multiple denominations could be seen, even where the Jewish community constituted the majority.[71] Citing Annamaria Orla-Bukowska. Galas concludes, "There was no Shtetl without its church, there was no Shtetl without its synagogue."[72] Galas believes this is clear evidence that inter-religious interactions happened in the Shtetl. Zborowsky and Herzog also concede some level of cultural interaction, though they maintain a perception of separation. They acknowledge that

> She [a typical Jewish woman] is familiar with the market place and with the merchants who frequent it. Therefore, on the whole women have a better command of the local language than do the learned men. The women and the *prosteh* [simple, unlearned] men converse freely in the language spoken by the peasants – Russian, Polish, Hungarian.[73]

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[70] John Klier, "What Exactly was a Shtetl?," in *The Shtetl Image and Reality: Papers of the Second Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish,* ed. Gennady Estraikh and Mikail Krutikov (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2017) 25.

[71] Michał Galas "Inter-Religious Contacats in the Shtetl: Proposals for Future Research," in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry,* ed. Antony Polonsky (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 42.

[72] Michał Galas, "Inter-Religious Contacts in the Shtetl, "43.

[73] Zborowski and Herzog, *Life is with the People*, 132.

While they make some concessions, an important boundary remains: the divisions of class and gender roles. In their hierarchy of learning, women and *prosteh* men appear at the bottom of the educational ladder. Zborowsky and Herzog present a model in which secular and religious life blend within Jewish communities, yet they maintain a firm separation between the Jewish religious world and the surrounding non-Jewish society, with only the marginalized interacting with their non-Jewish neighbours and their beliefs. "It should be expected that the superstitions of the neighboring folk should have gained the strongest foothold in that segment of the population least versed in the teachings of the Torah."[74] This however only hints at the interconnections that the Jewish community in general had with their non-Jewish neighbours.

According to Klier, "the shtetl might better be envisioned as the centre of an economic-cultural zone, linking Jews to Christians and Jews to Jews."[75] A Shtetl was in fact always a community where Christian and Jewish people were mingling with one another, particularly in the marketplace. This then challenges the memory of the Shtetl that has developed in the later twentieth century. The ambiguity of the term Shtetl versus "town" stems from these historical complexities. While a Shtetl might be officially classified as such, in practical terms, it functioned much like any other town.

Klier notes that close interreligious contact sometimes led to mutual observation and likely some tension. For example, Christians often engaged in highly public religious rituals, such as the *krestnyi khod*, a procession in the Orthodox church, or the feast of Corpus Christi for the Catholics in Poland. These processions often brought with them public curiosity. Conversely, Klier cites a Russian reporter describing how peasants formed a circle around the synagogue on Yom Kippur. It seems this was an expression of curiosity, wondering which Jews would come

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[74] Zborowski and Herzog, *Life is with the People,* 150.
[75] Klier, "What Exactly was a Shtetl?," 24.

out of the synagogue.[76] This shows the religious curiosity that Christians had toward their Jewish neighbours. This curiosity may have led to a reciprocal sense of unease, with Jews also feeling observed.

The scholars discussed here have looked at the Shtetl in the late nineteenth century. However, evidence of the Black Wedding predates this period. The key point is to demonstrate that the Shtetl was very likely a site of cultural curiosity, where different religious traditions may have influenced one another. In this chapter, I will focus on how Judaism shaped the Black Wedding; in the next chapter, on how non-Jewish traditions may have left their mark on the ritual.

Dynamics of Shtetl Life: the Marketplace and Social Roles

The Shtetl operated through two dynamics. The first was the overall structural flow. The second was the importance of social status within the Shtetl community.

The marketplace was the foundation of the Shtetl's structural flow. The relationship between Jews and non-Jews was often mediated through commerce. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, in his 2014 book *Golden Age Shtetl*, writes about an earlier era of the Shtetl, before the heyday of the Black Wedding; however, he provides important insight for the bed of cultural exchanges that would follow. His work is also important because the early origins of the Black Wedding are between the late eighteenth century and the 1830s, a time frame which would fit within Petrovsky's scholarship. His work highlights that to keep the marketplace functioning, Jews and non-Jews frequently interacted through trade and even smuggling. In one example, Jews and non-Jews collaborated to rid the Shtetl of an informer who prevented smuggled port from

[76] Klier, "What Exactly was a Shtetl?," 30.

entering the community. They worked with the tavernkeeper to remove the informer.[77] As Petrovsky-Shtern describes the significance of this alliance, "A trustworthy tavernkeeper was a commodity." The non-Jews refused to support the claims of the mailman Sokolovsky, who accused Toviovich, the tavernkeeper, of illegally importing port. This cooperation in smuggling was crucial for sustaining the Shtetl's marketplace. The marketplace was the meeting point for daily interactions between all residents of the Shtetl. However, this interconnectedness also shows that Jews and non-Jews were observing one another.

Second, the social roles within the community played a crucial part in maintaining its structure. Each member had a role to fulfill, with clear boundaries governing their responsibilities. We can take the tavernkeeper as one illustrative example of such a role. This role even predates the Shtetl. Petrovsky-Shtern notes that by 1795, 85% of Jews residing in rural areas of Eastern Poland were involved in tavernkeeping in some capacity.[78] A tavernkeeper could play an important role for the smuggling business and in controlling the flow of social interactions between Jews and non-Jews. The tavern was just as important as the synagogue. The tavern served as a hub for secrecy, politics, commerce, and employment.[79] The taverns and tavernkeepers were so important that even the Rebbes (the spiritual and communal leaders of Hasidic Judaism) understood their psychological power.[80] A trusted tavernkeeper kept the community bonds strong both for the marketplace and for the spiritual affairs of the Jewish community. I have focused on tavernkeepers as an example of a social role because they show

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[77] Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl,* 80.
[78] Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl,* 123
[79] Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl,* 129
[80] Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl,* 130

the interconnectedness of Jews and non-Jews in Shtetl life, and because they are significant in the Hasidic tale, "Wedding Presents," that is the focus of chapter three of this thesis.

Social Roles in Courtship and Marriage

Strong social roles within Shtetl society are also evident in courtship and marriage. Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* provides an illustrative example, quoting from the autobiography of Yehiel Yeshayahu Trunk, who recounts a story about his great-great-grandmother at the start of the nineteenth century:

> Devora… was a poor and simple orphan, who came from Plotsk. She had a stall in the market, and from this labor supported herself. When she had gathered an amount of money from her standing in the market for long days in sweltering heat and freezing cold—and she had from some time been sexually mature—she came to the local Rabbi, Rabbi Leibush the Brilliant, showed him the fund of gold coins that she had gathered through her toil, and requested that he, Rebbi Leibush the Brilliant, would provide for her a husband who was a Talmudic scholar. Rabbi Leibush answered her that he knew in Plotsk a Jew, somewhat advanced in age, who was a great Talmudic scholar, and who was supporting himself through teaching children. The man was poor and destitute, but an outstanding sage…
>
> The damsel Devora asked Rabbi Leibush the Brilliant: "Is this poor schoolmaster truly a great Talmudic scholar?"
>
> "Yes, my daughter," answered her Rabbi Leibush, "he is an outstanding Talmudic sage."

> "If so," said the orphan Devora, "I agree."
>
> From this union was born only one son; he was Rabbi Yehoshuale Kutner.[81]

This account exemplifies the role of men and the perceived ideals of Jewish masculinity: a religiously learned man was the ideal, regardless of age or wealth.

This passage also offers valuable insights into both the similarities and differences between normative Jewish weddings and the Black Wedding. Devora herself, as an orphan, could have been a candidate for a Black Wedding, yet she actively sought out a marriage. This case shows that the Black Wedding was only a situational ritual, performed only during epidemics. In addition, despite Devora's being an orphan, she was not completely marginalized as she herself could afford the finances of a dowry. By contrast, a Black Wedding would usually involve those who had no means of providing for themselves.

Examining further comparisons and distinctions, the rabbi in this account plays a role like that of a matchmaker, much like the Hasidic Rebbe in many Black Weddings. (Rebbes often recommended that Black Weddings take place, though they were not always direct participants in the wedding.) Another key similarity is the emphasis on financial stability. However, in this case, the woman was financially independent, while the man relied on her income. After a Black Wedding, the newlywed couple were supposed to be provided for by the community; however, we find a newspaper report from 1894 about a Black Wedding bridegroom, "Leybele the Orphan," going around begging.[82] In the story "Wedding Presents," which I will analyze in Chapter 3, we are told that the town will take care of the couple, but it also seems that both are

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[81] Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 70.

[82] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 102; David Shifman, "Ma'asim be-khol yom: zamoshtsh," *Ha-melits*, April 20, 1894, 4.

expected to work. This is a change from traditional gender roles, deemphasizing the idealized Jewish male figure, a scholar without practical concerns, in favour of a more secular, practical approach to marriage.

Marriage and Money

The Shtetl was always a product of both history and imagination. Because it existed in both these realms - one grounded in historical reality and the other in collective memory - Yiddish writers like Mendele Moykher-Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, 1835-1917) provide insight into marriage in the Shtetl. One of Mendele's famous novels, *Fishke the Lame,* provides details of several weddings, which help illustrate the normative expectations of Jewish communities and the role marriage was expected to play. In one passage, Mendele satirically depicts marriage as primarily an economic transaction, available only to the upper and lower classes - excluding beggars. As with the account of Devora's search for a husband, marriage in the world of Fishke is primarily a business venture:

> Everything is a business; even marriage is a business. We procure a wife for ourselves: first, we haggle over the price, over the dowry, over each and every little detail to our heart's content. All this is carefully written into the engagement contract. Even the fur cap or the Sabbath capote which goes into the dowry is listed in the contract. When all conditions are properly fulfilled, as stated in writing, "Then come, dear bride, let's go under the chupeh [the wedding canopy] together with the matchmaker, the master of ceremonies, and the whole pack of synagogue officials who all expect some commission. Be a wife, bear children, suffer and get wrinkled and gray together with me until we both reach one hundred and twenty…. For a wife is a wife. We are not lords or noblemen. We

> have no time to pay attention to such foolishness. We are Jews, merchants, traders, storekeepers, busy with our business.[83]

This passage highlights several key aspects of marriage in the Shtetl. First, that marriage is an economic transaction. The negotiations over the dowry and other financial matters suggest that only certain classes of people had the means to marry. Given these extensive negotiations, it follows that marriage was largely confined to those who could afford it. This portrayal provides insight into what a typical marriage in the Shtetl would be like.

These examples align with an important observation Zborowski and Herzog make. They note that matchmaking was the traditional way of arranging marriages; only the poorest members of society married for love.[84] Mendele presents a similar idea in *Fishke the Lame*: "Love affairs and marriages for love are customary only among the upper and lower classes. The rest of us… we're too busy eating our daily bread…"[85] This view is echoed in the later ethnographic work of Zborowsky and Herzog, highlighting the strong order that governed Shtetl life. For example, the act of hosting a wedding had its own social responsibilities. Both the memory ethnography of the 20th century and Mendele's writings show that in marriage as elsewhere, the social order was upheld.

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage was clearly an important institution in the Shtetl, but a possible argument for minimizing its importance is the fact that divorce rates were high. This appears to challenge the

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[83] Mendele Mocher Seforim, *Fishke the Lame*, trans. Gerald Stillman (New York, NY: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960) 176-177.

[84] Zborowski and Herzog, *Life is with the People*, 271.

[85] Seforim, *Fishke the Lame*, 176.

value of the Black Wedding in fulfilling the function of marrying more people. ChaeRan Freeze notes that in Tsarist Russia, Jews often had the highest rate of divorce. For example, in Vilna in 1837 there were 841.8 divorces per 1000 Jewish marriages.[86] The numbers are important because they intersect with the possible earliest accounts of the Black Wedding and provide some nuance to the importance of marriage. Divorce was a rather typical feature for Eastern European Jewry. Reasons for divorce mentioned by Freeze include a lack of livelihood. She goes on to state that over the course of the 19th century there began to be a decrease in the total number of divorces. Among the reasons for the decrease in divorce are "economic, legal (i.e., problems of residence rights, alimony, and child support), and social impediments (i.e., growing social stigma) that prevented a formal divorce."[87] Evidently another argument could be that as divorce began to be less favourable for women economically, marriage represented some form of stability for the community, though it could be a reluctant and oppressive one. What is missing from the discussion unfortunately are divorce rates from couples who married in a Black Wedding. Natan Meir finds some indication that in the late 19th century these couples began to revolt against the town leaders because of the reputation they would have afterwards.[88] However, nothing indicates the couples revolted against each other. This in part can be attributed to the marriage being an economic relationship between the town and the couple, less so between the couple themselves.

Contrary to our more romantic expectations about courtship, both the Hasidic tale "Wedding Presents" and various reports of the Black Wedding emphasize the economic responsibilities tied to marriage. This would have been a more common expectation in the Shtetl.

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[86] ChaeRan Freeze, "Marriage", *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe,* https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/2116.

[87] Freeze, "Marriage"

[88] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 101.

Devora's story helps us better understand the circumstances that set the Black Wedding apart from other Jewish weddings of this same time. Devora, seeking a marriage during a period of non-epidemic, having raised the funds herself, went out of her way to find a suitable marriage partner. On some level this is rule-breaking because she is the one using her own finances. The lack of involvement from the community speaks to the Black Wedding being an exceptional ritual during exceptional times. Outside of exceptional times the marginalized could only expect to be supported by themselves.

A Typical Wedding

To better clarify the distinct features of a Black Wedding, it is helpful to describe a normative Jewish wedding during the 19th century. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in the *YIVO Encyclopedia,* provides an overview of an Eastern European Jewish wedding.[89]

The marriage ritual was one not just for the couple but also served the couple in relationship to the community. The features themselves are tied closely to passing through life stages that transition the young couple into a fully incorporated unit in the community. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that they are intended to incorporate separation, transition and incorporation. These are the life stages enumerated by folklorist Arnold van Gennep, which will be discussed further in chapter two.

In the first phase of separation the bride and groom's lives were cut off from their previous phase of childhood. The bride was expected to go the mikveh (ritual bath) before the wedding; on the wedding day the bride and groom fasted before the evening prayers; the groom would wear a white *kitl* (robe), in which he would one day be buried, and ashes would be placed

[89] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Weddings." https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/2149

on his forehead. The bride's hair was cut during the seating and veiling and her head would be covered. During this moment sad music would be played by the master of ceremonies; everyone was expected to cry during this time. These actions although harsh show the close bonds between life and death that were deeply felt by the community.

In the second phase the bride and groom were in a state of transition from their childhood to adulthood. The bride and groom were brought to the canopy by their family. The bride would circle the groom several times and would stand in front of the groom. Her veil would be lifted and they would drink wine from the same goblet. He would place a ring on the bride's hand while reciting words to create a bond. The rabbi, or officiant, would read the *ketuvah* (marriage contract) and blessings would be recited over wine the couple would drink. The ceremony would end when the groom broke a glass with his foot. Immediately from this point of sadness and transition, the mood would change to excitement.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provides several reasons for the breaking of glass. One possible explanation is that shattering of glass serves as a means of protecting the couple from demons. Another reason is the importance of remembering the destruction of Jerusalem. She notes that in Western Ashkenazi tradition glasses were of different shapes to distinguish a bride who was a virgin from a bride who was not a virgin. This could be seen as a type of sexual symbolism. Regardless of the many possible explanations, the shattering of the glass represents a visceral moment that shocks the public festivities.

In the third phase the couple are united and incorporated into the community. The families mingle with each other. The couple move to a separate room and break their fast. The master of ceremonies during the wedding feast would entertain the guests and call out for wedding presents. The music, instead of being somber, was joyous. The guests were expected to

dance. One of the dances, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, was the *tkhies hameysim tants (*resurrection of the dead dance). Such a dance carried with it the symbolism of the transition from single life to the life of a couple.

Distinctiveness of the Black Wedding

Thus, even an ordinary wedding included a seemingly incongruous mix of joy and sorrow, and allusions to death. The Black Wedding accentuates these elements, including by actually taking place in a graveyard. But unlike traditional marriages, which involved detailed negotiations over dowries, the Black Wedding was not a business transaction between families. There was no financial bargaining or economic incentive for the community. Instead, the Black Wedding functioned as a communal act, forming a contract not between the couple, but between the couple and the community, and between the community and the Divine. In some cases, the community played the role of matchmaker, but unlike in a typical arranged marriage, there was no expectation of a dowry between the bride and groom. The Black Wedding's purpose was not economic but ritualistic. The ritual served as a type of boundary maintenance that upheld the proper order of the community. It was believed that upholding this marriage contract between the community and the town bride and groom would help ward off epidemics.

The Jewish community were vulnerable to accusations and scapegoating from state authorities during epidemics.[90] The reaction within the Jewish community was also harsh towards sexual immorality and marginalized people. Hasidic stories often linked sexual sins to outbreaks of disease. In one Hasidic tale, an epidemic originates from the offspring of the sexual

[90] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 92.

relationship of a man with a married woman.[91] Similarly, a nineteenth-century memoir by Yekhezkel Kotik mentions a belief that a Black Wedding could produce righteous children, providing spiritual protection for the community.[92] Progressive Yiddish newspapers criticized rabbis for encouraging beliefs that tied disease to adultery.[93] Blaming marginalized people also required that the solution to these epidemics involve marginalized people. Blaming sexual immorality meant that the solution required the acceptable sexual framework of marriage.

Thus, marriage as a form of boundary maintenance played a key role in the Black Wedding ritual. Michael Satlow's theory of boundary maintenance[94] identifies several levels at play: boundaries between social classes, between Jews and non-Jews, and between life and death. The Black Wedding occupied a liminal space within these boundaries. The couple's marriage symbolized a means of preserving the Jewish community's longevity, protecting it from external threats, disease, and internal social disorder.

Jewish communities in the nineteenth century existed within a delicate social structure maintained by rigid boundaries. These social strata played a significant role in shaping the Black Wedding's existence. However, the practice also appears to breach certain normative patterns. There were multiple ways the Black Wedding was performed; all of them took place on the injunction of a community leadership rather than through a man or a woman going to a matchmaker, as was normally the case. Furthermore, an important aspect of the Black Wedding is its gender dynamic. Natan Meir has noted that women organized many Black Weddings.[95]

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[91] *Ma'aseh ha-kedoshim* (Lemberg, 1894), no. 9, cited in Gedalyah Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 151, 169.

[92] Yekhezkel Kotik, David Assaf, and Margaret Birnstein, *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 383.

[93] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 96.

[94] Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity,* 265.

[95] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 98.

Traditional Jewish life in the nineteenth century was structured around gendered roles: women's responsibilities were centred around the home and market interactions. Public religious leadership was generally reserved for men, and matchmaking in the Shtetl was a male profession. But women took on a form of matchmaking and religious leadership when they organized Black Weddings. Additionally, Mendele's descriptions show that Black Weddings could go against normative halakha (Jewish law). This type of antinomianism (actions or rituals against normal law) has appeared throughout Jewish history, but the Black Wedding was controversial, for this and other reasons.

Antinomianism and Controversy

The Black Wedding was never without controversy. For example, Jeremy Brown has found a newspaper article from 1866 criticizing the practice of the Black Wedding. This article also shows the social position Jewish communities occupied between tradition and modernity. The writer, Shimon Yehuda Stanislowsky, criticized the Black Wedding practice, writing,

> My heart sank and my face fell as I witnessed this. I could not believe that in this day and age our fellow Jews would believe in this bizarre idea. I asked them about this, what were they doing, and what was the origin of this custom. Their mouths filled with laughter, and they replied, "This custom is from our ancestors who must certainly have know what it was that they were doing." These people did not know that not every custom is good, and that there are foolish and idiotic customs.[96]

[96] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague,*195.

Stanislowsky's response is interesting for two reasons. The first is his obvious contempt for superstition, and the second is his disdain for tradition. It is important to note that this news report came from a city, Ekatarinoslav in Ukraine, which may have led to Stanislowsky adopting a more metropolitan view of epidemic prevention. Brown notes that in his report, Stanislowsky credits the city leaders with taking additional measure to help the poor. His response is valuable because it shows that even when the practice was widely observed there were detractors. Another important detail from his report is the mention of bringing food into the cemetery. According to the Shulhan Arukh, the still authoritative early modern code of Jewish law, a person should never enter the cemetery irreverently,[97] this would include bringing in food and drinks. It is understandable that seeing such an action in a Black Wedding would be an affront to more metropolitian and traditional views alike.

Using Natan Meir's categorization of the three historical phases of the Black Wedding's existence.[98] the practice has waxed and waned regarding social acceptance, and the meaning and understanding of the Black Wedding has changed over time. Earlier historical records reveal civil pushback, while at times Rebbes themselves recommended a Black Wedding. In other instances, there were backlashes from certain community leaders. There were other cases where the community insisted on holding a Black Wedding, while the local Rabbi tried to negotiate either its cancellation or its relocation outside of the cemetery.[99] Such conflicts show that the Black Wedding was not just an odd practice from a secular perspective, but that it had detractors from those familiar with Halakha as well.

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[97] Shulchan Arukh YD 368:1
[98] Natan Meir categorizes the first wave 1865-1866, second wave 1889-1894, third wave 1910-1920
[99] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 99.

One issue is the delicate order of the Shtetl, being interrupted by the Black Wedding. The Black Wedding seemingly endorsed or permitted controversial actions. This is highlighted for example in *Fishke the Lame*. Mendele highlights the subversiveness of the Black Wedding in *Fishke the Lame*, which mentions an example of a Black Wedding involving an allegedly intersex (*androginos*) woman.[100] This wedding would have been prohibited by the halakha, as discussed in the Mishnah, the most ancient and canonical text of rabbinic law. The fourth chapter of Mishnah Bikkurim mentions explicitly that an intersex person (in Hebrew: *androginos*) cannot be married to a man.[101] The Mishnah does provide some caveats: they may take a wife. Apparently, the concern was the possibility of male-male sex. More stringently, the Shulhan Arukh states that an intersex person who enters into a betrothal is considered in a state of doubtful betrothal and a *Get* (religious divorce) is required.[102]

There is also a newspaper report from 1866 of a Black Wedding in which a *mamzer* was married to a "little girl."[103] The article in question does not mention if the little girl was also a *mamzer*. Since a *mamzer*, someone born as the result of incest or adultery, is only allowed to marry another *mamzer* or a convert to Judaism, [104] it is likely that this marriage too was breaking normative rules. Later, I will mention an example from Winnipeg of a Kohen (a man whose lineage is traced to the ancient Jewish priesthood) entering a cemetery, breaking normative halakha.[105]

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[100] Seforim, *Fishke the Lame*, 46.

[101] Mishnah Bikkurim 4:2

[102] Shulchan Arukh, Even HaEzer 44:5

[103] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 98; Menakhem Nakhum b' ha-rov Yerakhmiel, "Misterei (di geheymnise) krementshug," Kol mevaser, July 26, 1866, 420.

[104] Shulchan Arukh, Even HaEzer 4:19-24.

[105] Leviticus 21:1-5; Shulhan Aruh Yoreh De'ah 371:5 serve as some examples supporting this prohibition.

These examples highlight the awkward position the Jewish community found itself in regarding the Black Wedding. The Black Wedding represents a break with normative tradition, for a greater purpose.

Despite the evidence provided, I would caution against drawing too broad a conclusion. The world of Fishke is a fictional world, and the character of the bride is only allegedly an intersex person. Still, Mendele had a sharp eye for the people of his day, and his wit speaks to a greater truth about Eastern European Jewry and their folk practices. Mendele's characters such as Fishke move away from solely moralistic tales to social realism. In this case the Black Wedding certainly broke with normative modes of ritual. Through the Black Wedding's prophylactic intent, or through the possible children produced from the marriage, this antinomian ritual emphasized survival of the community over all other laws and restrictions.

The concept of survival is closely linked to antinomianism and the categorization of religious transgressions. Shaul Magid has written about various Jewish expressions of antinomianism. He understands antinomianism as a spiritual critique of conventional religious behaviour. In *Hasidism on the Margins*, he identifies three types of antinomianism. The first is "hard antinomianism," which can be defined as a complete separation from the previous nomos (body of law), supplanting the nomos with a new legal and moral code. The second category is "neo-antinomianism," which is not relevant to our discussion. The third category is "soft antinomianism," which introduces a subjective, experiential source of authority that temporarily conflicts with the established nomos but does not intend to supplant it the way "hard antinomianism" would. [106]

[106] Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margins*, (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) 207.

It is important to note that Shaul Magid's categorical distinctions focus on individual experiences in Hasidism and are not directly related to the practice of the Black Wedding. However, they provide a typological foundation for analyzing the unique structure of the Black Wedding as it relates to normative halakha. First, the concept of "hard antinomianism" will be examined to illustrate why it does not align with the Black Wedding. Then the category of "soft antinomianism" will be explored to demonstrate why it is a better framework for understanding this practice. Throughout these discussions, Shaul Magid's examples will be referenced both to delineate these boundaries and to clarify how they help define the Black Wedding.

The first distinction, "hard antinomianism," is analyzed by Shaul Magid through the example of Christianity's rejection of Biblical law. By drawing on this distinction, he highlights how antinomianism differs within a Jewish context. For example, he examines how in some antinomian Christian thought, an individual can achieve salvation through being one with the divine without practicing moral law.[107] This Christian antinomian view could be convincing because it drew on Paul's critique of the law and his idea that grace is the means to salvation. Magid writes that this Christian hard antinomianism became a signpost for later Christian movements, for example in Calvinism, or Kierkegaard's "Teleological suspension of the ethical," with the expectation that moral laws are secondary to a greater purpose. Most forms of Jewish mysticism do not take this hard approach.[108]

The Black Wedding itself does not replace normative weddings. This practice is not normalized as a new means of getting married. Other features of "hard antinomianism" are often a descent into libertinism and a complete negation of certain standards established by the old

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[107] Magid, *Hasidism on the Margins*, 208.
[108] Magid, *Hasidism on the Margins*, 216.

nomos. The example of Christianity features a radical departure from the established law, including rejection of dietary restriction and circumcision. Unlike the example of Paul's teachings and other developments in Christianity, the Black Wedding does not supplant the normative Jewish halakha.

The other important category Magid suggests is "soft antinomianism," presenting an interesting pivot on nomos. In this example, there is not a complete disregard for but rather a tension with the normative nomos. Often, within the Jewish context, soft antinomianism results in stricter rulings rather than more lenient interpretations of halakha.[109] In the example of the Black Wedding there is not a total abandonment of the established nomos; rather, there is a preservation of the social order. This aligns with Magid's poignant point, "As is common in other soft antinomian positions… the mystical fraternity… elevate their own subjective sense of divine will as authoritative, even as it transgresses halakha."[110] In the case of the Black Wedding, there is only a deviation to ensure that people who may have categorically been excluded from marriage were wed. These marriages were done to reinforce the continuation of a normative Jewish nomos.

In the case of the marriage of an intersex individual, as mentioned in the novel *Fishke the Lame*, the wedding would be considered halakhically invalid. Thus, the Black Wedding is in some sense an abrogation of the normal laws. However, examining this marriage and others, contrary to the idea that the Black Wedding would lead to a breakdown of the moral fabric or encourage licentious behaviour, it did not cause a collapse of societal norms. In fact, the expectation of the couple in the story is that they would be fruitful. In Mendele's telling, the crowd responded, "Let them multiply, let the children of Israel replenish the earth in the face of

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[109] Magid, *Hasidism on the Margins*, 220.
[110] Magid, *Hasidism on the Margins*, 220.

the cholera. Let the poor cripples enjoy themselves also…"[111] The townspeople go to great lengths to make the bride and the bridegroom feel as normal as possible. This would be the more important point in terms of communal stability.

The fictional story also points to a historical truth: the Black Wedding resulted in hypernomian behaviour from the Jewish community at large. The Black Wedding reinforced certain communal and religious obligations rather than undermining them. Additionally, the Jewish community became increasingly responsible for caring for the newlywed couple. In the historical example of Black Weddings, the issue of social obligation is a far greater concern. In the face of the reality that Eastern European Jewry faced higher divorce rates in Tsarist Russia,[112] social obligation was not just to the Jewish community; this was also about the larger surrounding communities around them. The role of the community played a greater day-to-day role than the roles each family member would play with each other.

Challenges to Authority

Seeing the Black Wedding as a means of maintaining order also raises the question of authority. If the Black Wedding originated in the early nineteenth century, then the political landscape in which the Jewish community lived in the Russian Empire must also be considered. Benjamin Nathan examines the shifting power dynamics of the Jewish community in that context. Before the partitions of Poland between Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, which began in 1772, the Jewish community enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, and the Polish government collected taxes from Jewish communities through their local kahals

[111] Seforim, *Fishke the Lame*, 46.
[112] ChaeRan Freeze, "Marriage"

(Jewish structures of self-government).[113] In the early period following the partitions, these autonomous structures remained intact. However, over time, the Russian government grew increasingly concerned about Jewish autonomy within its newly annexed territories (known as the Pale of Settlement, since the Russian government tried to contain Jews within this region rather than allowing them to settle elsewhere in the empire). The Jews were suspected of potential separatist tendencies. This created the second factor of the changing power dynamic—the Russian wish to assimilate the Jewish community.

The choice to attempt assimilation through conscription into the army created significant internal tension within the Jewish community. Conscription disproportionately affected younger, poorer, Jews, while wealthier members could pay the government to exempt their own. Benjamin Nathan writes that the loss of the kahal, the military conscription, and sectarian conflict created a power vacuum.[114] Three primary groups sought to fill the void: the traditional rabbinate, the merchant class, and the Hasidic movement, with its charismatic leaders known as Rebbes.[115] This power vacuum facilitated the growth and development of folk traditions. Early accounts of the Black Wedding often appear in Hasidic stories, suggesting that Rebbes may have used the practice as a means of consolidating their authority within the broader community.

The Black Wedding as protection from epidemic also fits well into a Hasidic world-view in which God responds to human intervention—especially by, or approved by, Rebbes—with miraculous help. But how was this theurgy or "magic" supposed to work?

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[113] Nathan. *Beyond the Pale,* 25.
[114] Nathan. *Beyond the Pale,* 38.
[115] Nathan. *Beyond the Pale,* 5, 39.

Sacrifice and Scapegoating

A possible answer comes from Meir's understanding of the Black Wedding as a substitution sacrifice— an offering to the Divine to rid the community of the plague. For a parallel example, we can look to the earlier scholarship of Joshua Trachtenberg. In *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, Trachtenberg discusses the relationship between charity and the poor. Since the Middle Ages, as mentioned in Geonic texts, there has been a practice of slaughtering roosters and hens on the eve of Yom Kippur, preceding which the bird is waved around over the head of an individual; this ritual is called Kapparot ("atonements").[116] This offering is done as a penal substitution. One possible explanation Trachtenberg provides is the close association fowls have to spirits. Another explanation is homophonic. "The Hebrew term for 'rooster,' *gever*… also means 'man,' making the one a palpable substitute for the other."[117] Thus, a rooster was eligible to be a substitute for a man. Trachtenberg mentions that the typical procedure is to give the slaughtered bird to the poor. This practice was controversial. Trachtenberg mentions one rabbi who stated that such an offering passed the sins of the individual to the poor. Instead, the rabbi suggested giving money to the poor, and this option is also still practiced today.[118] Judaism thus has a long history of transferring sins onto the poorer members of the Jewish community.

Meir cites many legends that involve a kind of sacrifice on behalf of the community, such as that of Rabbi Liber of Berdichev. According to this legend, when an epidemic struck the community in 1771, the rabbi first attempted to repair the cemetery and even performed a type of Black Wedding. When none of those actions worked, the rabbi decided to be the communal

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[116] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 164.

[117] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition,* 164.

[118] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition,* 164.

sacrifice and passed away in his sleep to save the community. Meir also notes that in some Shtetls in the Pale of Settlement, a mound near the main synagogue contained the remains of a couple who had been murdered by the Cossack and Ukrainian followers of Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi, during the uprising of 1648, while on their way to the wedding canopy.[119] The grave in question became the "Holy Grave." Such a grave is featured in the play "The Dyybuk" by S. Ansky. In the play one of the townspeople mentions that after a wedding the Rabbi hears sighs coming from the grave, so after the wedding the people dance around the couple's grave.[120]

Meir further cites Naftuli Vaynig, an ethnographer who was part of the Ethnographic Commission of YIVO (*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*, Jewish/Yiddish Scientific Institute, based in Vilnius until the second world war and the Holocaust, in which Vaynig also perished). Vaynig argues that the Black Wedding contained elements of sacrifice. He refers to an instance in Grodno where the groom protested to the organizer, "all want to live, you want to bury me alive!" Vaynig also cites a Yiddish short story by Joseph Opatoshu about a Black Wedding, "A Wedding in the Cemetery" (1929). The couple notices that the first gift they are given, a tin spoon, is waved by an old woman around her head three times in a Kapparot fashion as she states, "from me to you." The crowd repeat this phrase as they give presents.[121] Only at the end of the story does the bride realize she has lost her autonomy and tries to challenge the status given to her, but the story's abrupt ending, as Meir notes, leaves her powerless.[122] Thus, in both historical and fictional accounts, the wedded couple were seen as scapegoats. Vaynig believed this was a signal that the Black Wedding signalled sacrificial intent. Vaynig also draws

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[119] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 116.

[120] Ansky, S. "The Dybbuk." In *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader,* edited by Joachim Neugroschel (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 22-23.

[121] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 218

[122] Meir, *Stephchildren of the Shtetl,* 219.

comparisons between the Black Wedding and scapegoat rituals in ancient Athenian agricultural festivals, in which individuals were expelled from the community, or remained on the margins after being put through some humiliating action for the public. These rituals used marginalized individuals, often slaves, criminals or poor people, to act as the scapegoats. Vaynig also suggests that the perceived ugliness of the couple was seen as scaring the cholera disease away from the community.

I have mentioned that the Black Wedding acted in some ways as a soft antinomian practice. The act lifted a couple who would have never otherwise wed. At the same time, though, the practice has been seen as scapegoating the sins of the Jewish community at large onto the disenfranchised, similar to how in the practice of Kapparot sins were seen as being passed on to the poor. In what ways can the Black Wedding be seen as a scapegoat ritual? For one, the wedding is hosted by the community. Second, the community provides offerings for the Town Bride and Groom. Third, the community is responsible for providing for the couple. All of these acts can be seen in a rather cynical light. That is: rather than being an act of *hesed* (kindness) toward the couple, the charity is instead for the community to prolong its life. The act of *hesed* comes with the hope that God will indeed honour the charity provided to the couple. At the same time, I am considering Mendele's words on the social roles of upper class, lower class, and beggars. Now the couple, who may have been beggars, are in a new social stratum. This means they have new obligations – and are opening themselves up to more potential transgressions.

René Girard's seminal work *Violence and the Sacred* has much to say about the concept of the scapegoat. He writes that violence is often a necessary part of community relationships. He expresses the idea of holiness as something community-forming but also dangerous:

> Sacrifice can be defined solely in terms of the sacred, without reference to any particular divinity; that is, it can be defined in terms of maleficent violence polarized by the victim and metamorphosed by his death… into beneficent violence. Although the sacred is "bad" when it is inside the community, it is "good" when it returns to the exterior. The language of pure sacredness retains whatever is most fundamental to myth and religion, it detaches violence from man to make it a separate, impersonal entity, a sort of fluid substance that flows everywhere and impregnates on contact. The concept of contagion is obviously a by-product of this way of envisaging the sacred.[123]

The sacred exists in a type of miasma around the community. The concept of a scapegoat has the effect of insulating and purifying the community. In the case of the Black Wedding, however, the scapegoat—the disenfranchised beggar or disabled person—is pushed, not out of the community, but out of their former marginal state into integration in the community. In a parallel to the categories for candidates of Black Weddings, Girard notes many times that scapegoat are beggars, cripples or vagabonds.[124] I conclude that the Black Wedding remains a symbolic gesture of "pushing out," and can be seen as blaming the scapegoats as the cause for the disease. Girard points out that this kind of violence "rallies the whole community around itself in order to save mankind and restore culture." The Black Wedding was a way of saving the community and reinstilling Jewish laws and values into the community.

Writing on the surrogate victims of violence, Girard writes, "As the violence subsides it is thought to have departed with the victim, to have somehow been projected outside the community. The community itself is felt to be free of infection- so long, that is, as the cultural

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[123] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* , 258.
[124] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* , 254.

order within it is respected."[125] I will expand on this more in chapter 3. However, it is important to note that while the Black Wedding is not an act of violence it does act as a prophylactic through the potential cause of the disease - the disenfranchised. Through their incorporation into the community, the community has performed a mitzvah (fulfilled a commandment) of marrying a bride and providing care for the couple. They have in a sense provided a restart for the boundaries of the community.

Boundary Maintenance

The new social obligations presented to the newlywed couple act as a form of boundary maintenance. The Black Wedding would preserve the social order of the Jewish community. With death all around, important roles were being lost and would, in some sense, be filled now by taking someone on the margins and incorporating them into the community. Mary Douglas' work, which examines purity in religions from around the world, highlights the significance of the human body. One of her conclusions is, "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious."[126] This reflects the connection between the body and the system of boundaries between the pure and defiled.

Within an Eastern European Jewish framework, a notable example of these concerns can be found in the concept of the dybbuk. A dybbuk is a disembodied spirit found in Jewish folklore; the disembodied spirit usually has a goal that it needs to accomplish and it does so by attaching itself onto the body of a living being, as exemplified in S. Ansky's play, "The Dybbuk." The dybbuk is typically a dangerous spirit. Most typically it is a male spirit which infiltrates a

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[125] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 266.
[126] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 116.

female body. Rachel Elior proposes that the Dybbuk represented a state of mental illness and loss of control.[127] From an external perspective, this was seen as an invasion of the body by an outside force. According to Elior, the dybbuk provided a means for the powerless to deviate from the normal order of the world.

Elior describes the exorcism performed to remove the dybbuk as a *yiḥud* (union). In this ritual the goal was to demarcate the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. The possessing soul was removed from the living, the original soul returned to the body. The ritual was described in wedding-like terms.[128]

For example, in a wedding ceremony, the wedding would take place at a synagogue in front of a minyan (prayer quorum). In exorcising a dybbuk, the exorcism would take place in a synagogue as well, in front of a minyan. Both the marriage ceremony and the exorcism are related to the Hebrew root דבק, d-b-k, which conveys attachment or bonding.[129] Elior notes that the connections between weddings and exorcisms are like photographic negatives.[130] The dybbuk exorcism takes place to separate the spirits, while a wedding binds the two together. Where the marriage is praised as the uniting of two people into one flesh, the unity of the dybbuk to the flesh is condemned as coercion. Another parallel is that a Jewish wedding includes the reading of a *ketubah*, solemn promises in archaic wording, while the exorcism uses "adjurations, unification formulas, curses and excommunications."[131] Elior also notes that in a wedding ceremony a ring is used to symbolically bind the bride to the groom, while the amulet given to the woman in the exorcism shows the total separation of the individual from the dybbuk. Another

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[127] Rachel Elior, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore.* (Jerusalem, Israel: Urim Publications, 2008), 57.

[128] Elior, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women,* 109.

[129] Elior, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women,* 105.

[130] Elior, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women,* 105

[131] Elior, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women,* 107.

common factor is the importance of names and naming the couples involved. Only when the dybbuk is named can he be expelled. "The dybbuk represents banishment, impurity, death, and destruction; and society strives to expel and excommunicate it."[132] Elior also brings up that illness was a manifestation of the dybbuk taking over the body. The idea that a wedding could serve as a means of warding off illness or disease connects these dybbuk practices to our main focus, the Black Wedding.

Michael Satlow extends Mary Douglas' ideas about the body to the level of social groups. He analyzes this group anxiety in the context of ancient Jewish marriage and boundary maintenance, suggesting that a group concerned with maintaining its boundaries can use marriage as a tool for the transference of these anxieties.[133] He applies this theory to Jewish marriage across several periods, including the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman Palestinian, and Babylonian eras. In all these cases, Satlow challenges an essentialist view of Jewish marriage, emphasizing that marriage was primarily about maintaining proper boundaries. For instance, after 212 CE in Roman Palestine, Jews were able to marry non-Jews, including those with Roman citizenship or Christians. Satlow proposes that rabbinic discussions around marriage during this time reflected anxieties regarding the increasing urbanization of Jews from rural communities.[134] His work reveals the mutability within the Jewish context of the meaning of marriage. Such mutability allows for distinct variations in the practice of marriage.

Natan Meir's scapegoat theory of the Black Wedding complements this framework. The Black Wedding can be seen as a form of boundary maintenance. It operates within the traditional trope of a sin offering, as also described by Trachtenberg. In one sense, the sins of the

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[132] Elior, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women,* 109.
[133] Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity,* 265.
[134] Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity,* 265.

community are transferred to the couple, but the couple are also ostensibly brought into the normative fold of the Jewish community. This could be interpreted as a cause for celebration, as the couple is integrated into the community. However, being brought into the normative fold meant that the couple and the community were expected to uphold obligations that they would otherwise not have been obligated to uphold. For the couple, this would have included actions such as running a business and studying Torah. In moralistic tales that feature the Black Wedding, such as in *Fishke the Lame* or the Hasidic tale "Wedding Presents" (which will be discussed in Chapter 3), the now reintegrated couple from the Black Wedding are expected to contribute to the community rather than being solely recipients of charity from others. At the same time, the community, having unmarginalized a couple, and performed the mitzvah of marrying off a bride, is now in a supposed clean slate. The reintegration of the marginalized and marrying the bride are supposed to have the added effect of ridding the community of the epidemic.

Mendele's focus on class obligations provides insights into the challenges of the boundaries of Shtetl life and how the Black Wedding upheld these boundaries while seemingly appearing to break normative Jewish law. Marriage, traditionally reserved for the upper and lower classes, excluded beggars. By performing such a ritual, the community expresses and fulfills a desire to ensure the continuity of Jewish life– not just for procreation but also for maintaining social and class structures. The cholera epidemic, which claimed community members regularly, meant that gaps were created within the community. As well, if these gaps were left unfilled, the delicate balance between Jews and non-Jews could be disrupted. The Black Wedding thus provides an opportunity to maintain social and communal normalcy, despite suspending certain halakhic rules, as illustrated by the example of the intersex bride in *Fishke the*

Lame or the *mamzer* groom in a newspaper account. In the long run, they are upholding the halakha and the whole structure of the community.

Chapter II - Non-Jewish Context

Jeremy Brown notes the carnivalesque nature of the Black Wedding, which brought together Jews and their Christian neighbours:

> Given the desperate circumstances that had led to the marriage and the unfortunate lives of the bride and groom themselves, as well as the somber location chosen for the wedding, we would expect it would be performed quickly and with only a modest nod to the usual traditional celebration. However, precisely the opposite occurred. There was a happy carnival-like atmosphere in which the local non-Jewish population often participated.[135]

This chapter will move from the Jewish context of the Black Wedding to its equally important non-Jewish contexts.

Cholera and the Marginalized

The Black Wedding's focus on the marginalized in the context of mass death by cholera was cross-culturally typical. The Black Wedding and the cholera in Europe appear in history at the same time. Although the term "cholera" existed earlier, referring to vomiting and diarrhea not linked to epidemics, it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that the disease known today, an infection by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*, was recognized. Cholera, as commonly understood, includes those symptoms as well as dehydration, shock, muscle cramps, fatigue, and

[135] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague,*193.

sunken eyes, and was often fatal.[136] Risk factors for the disease include poor sanitation and household exposure, among others. Cholera is believed to have originated from India and spread through merchants.[137] The disease thus appeared in some ways as a challenge to Enlightenment, nationalism and imperialism, as the global spread of the disease impacted many states and communities. The disease stood at the apex of modernity in a conflict between traditional healing methods and modern medical science. The Black Wedding developed as a pseudo-traditional approach for stopping this globalized disease. Its focus on the disenfranchised was typical.

In Peter Baldwin's book, *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830-1930*, the chapter on cholera is dedicated to how Central and Eastern European states responded to the epidemic. "The poor, widely agreed to be especially susceptible to disease, either because of their insalubrious living conditions, poor nourishment or unfortunate habits, were the object of particular attention."[138] For example, actions taken in Berlin included reporting overcrowding, instructing individuals on sanitary precautions, and quarantining. These measures were seen as virtuous, meant to support the poor.[139] There were also economic incentives that allowed people who were otherwise unemployed to acquire employment at factories worried about the slowing pace of the economy. Governments in Prussia as well as elsewhere showed a fixation on the poor both as a source for the disease and potential spreaders. Their actions often combined social restrictions with moral teachings.

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[136] "Cholera." Mayo Clinic, https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/cholera/symptoms-causes/syc-20355287, accessed May 8, 2025.

[137] Hamlin, *Cholera: The Biography*, 50.

[138] Peter Baldwin. "Enter Cholera." In *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830-1930*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 58.

[139] Baldwin. "Enter Cholera," 57

Thus the Black Wedding fits into an international pattern of trying to stop cholera by intervening in the lives of disenfranchised people. This chapter will now explore more specific ritual aspects of the non-Jewish context.

Natan Meir's View

As mentioned, Natan Meir's important work on the Black Wedding argues that it was a wholly Jewish practice. In his concluding thoughts on this topic, he reflects on the conditions that led to its emergence:

> The cholera wedding reenacted both the traditional integration of the marginal figure into the community and the modern demonization and (at times) expulsion of that figure from the collectively striving for integration[140]

In Meir's view, the Black Wedding is entirely an expression of the Ashkenazi Jewish experience in Eastern Europe. He argues this could not have been a practice observed by a community that was not marginalized.

Still, Natan Meir acknowledges that Jewish communities in cities like Kiev were in closer contact with non-Jewish communities than previously reported.[141] His own analysis also highlights some overlapping beliefs that Slavic Christians shared with their Ashkenazi neighbours.[142] For example, Meir cites folklorist Samuel Rappoport (S. Ansky), who believed that the source of the Black Wedding was in Jewish mystical traditions, stemming from a

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[140] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 239.

[141] Natan Meir. "Jews, Ukrainians, and Russians in Kiev: Intergroup Relations in Late Imperial Associational Life." *Slavic Review* 65, no. 3 (2006): 478-479. doi:10.2307/4148660.

[142] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,*103.

Kabbalistic ritual meant to counter the power of the marriage of Lilith and Samael (female and male demonic beings) which took place in a cemetery. But simultaneously Meir cites Victoria Mochalova, who writes that Jewish and Slavic magic traditions shared a common belief about the cemetery – namely, that it was a space where rituals intended to heal illness or purify the village could take place.[143] Meir even cites an article by Yom Tov Levinski (1963) about a very early precedent for the Black Wedding: a Christian wedding that happened in 1556 in Łomża. In this particular wedding, three exhumed bodies were present for the ceremony, as they were believed to play a role in ending the plague.[144]

The existence of these shared beliefs prompts further consideration of possible common influences between the Ashkenazi and Slavic worlds. Through this investigation, there should be a word of caution. There is no clear line between any specific non-Jewish practice and the Black Wedding. It would be unlikely to find a document confirming that this practice influenced that practice. Nevertheless, this chapter will examine the cultural milieu surrounding the practice itself.

Slavic and Jewish Confluences in Poland

Hanna Węgrzynek has written about possible influences on the Black Wedding found within Poland. This thesis will build on her approach when examining non-Jewish influences.

One of the early examples of cross-cultural influence in areas of Slavic influence can be seen in grave visitations. As noted in the first chapter, the Shtetl was not an isolated community; the Jewish and Slavic communities were regularly in contact. Węgrzynek writes that the tradition

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[143] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 109.
[144] Yomtov Levinski, "'Hatunot mageifah' be-minhagei ashkenaz," Mahanayim, no. 83 (1963): 60-63; Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 110.

of the Black Wedding emerged through a process in which Slavic customs informed and influenced Jewish practices. The most prevalent of these customs, according to Węgrzynek, was All Souls' Day and the practice of visiting the graves of deceased family members. The Church opposed various aspects of this practice, and they have largely died out; therefore, Węgrzynek notes, much of what is known comes through the play *Dziady* (All Forefathers' Eve) which was originally published in 1822.[145] As the play portrays the ritual, the residents of a town would gather at a cemetery chapel or a secluded area, inviting the souls of the dead to join them. As this tradition evolved, the meaning of "Forefathers" also began to shift. Rather than referring to ancestors, the term became associated with beggars asking for alms. This transformation highlights the adaptability of rituals. The fact that these rituals underwent change and transition further underscores the challenges of drawing clear connections between cultural influences. Węgrzynek believes this Slavic custom could have been a precursor for the Ashkenazi Jewish community to be compelled to visit cemeteries in a space melding life and death, and for the Black Wedding's focus on beggars or other marginalized people.

The connections between Slavic cultural practices and Jewish practices are important. However, an important directly religious influence on the Black Wedding was the Orthodox Church. In Poland, the Orthodox Church was in a weaker position than the Catholic Church. To maintain whatever hold it had on the population, the Orthodox Church embraced non-Christian Slavic practices that the Catholic Church opposed.[146] This included rituals for the ancestors. One example of such a ritual was the cemetery feasts held during Easter in the city of Sokal (today in Ukraine). These feasts were exclusively attended by married women. The women visited the

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[145] Hanna Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2011), P. 59

[146] Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," 60.

priest and offered him food. Afterwards, the women would eat together in the cemetery. Cemetery feasts, organized by community leaders, often included vodka, recalling the drinking and merriment in descriptions of Black Weddings. In another cemetery feast in the Podlasie region, there was a *kulisha*, "dance of the dead"[147] after the feast, danced by boys and girls. The description of the Kulisha dance is terse, simply stating that the little boys and girls would do this dance. (Węgrzynek does note that a Polish tradition which continues to this day is carolling and having one of the people carolling dressed as Death.[148])

Another important point was the public visibility of these Orthodox rituals. The Orthodox Church's strong connection to both ancestors and the living, with public processions, contributed key elements of the Black Wedding. The Black Wedding featured a surprisingly public procession through a cemetery. Christian cemeteries were attached to churches; however, a cemetery in Poland in the 19th century was rarely attached to a synagogue.[149] The sight of a wedding in a cemetery would be a shocking one. Public processions of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches served as a template for the Black Wedding's procession. Furthermore, the All Souls' Feast involved active engagement with the dead in the cemetery. These two points of contact provide some evidence of cultural exchange.

Despite these compelling arguments, Węgrzynek cautions against drawing a straight line from these practices to the Black Wedding. First, some details of the practices she mentions are known only through early medieval sources, predating the arrival of Jews in the region in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Second, broader patterns such as feasts honouring the dead or the "Dance of Death" have been popular throughout Europe and beyond, making it difficult to

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[147] Adam Fischer, Święto umarłych (Lviv: Muzeum im. Dzieduszyckich, 1923), 32; Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," 60.

[148] Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," 60.

[149] Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," 60.

prove that any specific Polish custom along these lines influenced the Jewish community. Finally, we do not have evidence that the practices Węgrzynek describes were connected with warding off epidemics. Slavic practices that did have that purpose, such as having four young women in harness plough the fields around the town to keep an epidemic away, have little similarity to the Black Wedding.[150]

Complexities of Cross-Cultural Influence

One of the challenges in distinguishing between Jewish and non-Jewish influences is the identification of clear cultural markers. Kristian Gerner writes about assimilation and symbiosis in Hungary and Poland. Drawing on the ideas of Hermann Cohen, Gerner identifies two key patterns – "bivalence" and "symbiosis" - that were prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[151] "Bivalence" refers to the coexistence of non-conflicting, interlinked ideas from two cultures. "Symbiosis" applies more to the communal level, referring to imagined communities that are deeply connected. These two ideas highlight the complexities of assimilating beliefs and religious practices.

Assimilation presents a challenge across all religious traditions. In the Jewish context, Michał Galas raises this issue in "Inter-Religious contacts in the Shtetl: Proposals for Future Research." Galas argues that much of the existing scholarship is often one-sided, focusing either on Polish Christians or Jews. As a result, the study of cross-religious influence becomes more difficult. According to both Węgrzynek and Brown, one major challenge is determining what

[150] Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," 61.

[151] Kristian Gerner. "Ethnic Triangles, Assimilation, and the Complexities of Acculturation in a Multi-ethnic Society." *Polin Studies in Polish Jewry* 31 (2019): 42. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/713493.

constitutes a clear influence within a bivalent community. Where does one culture's practice end and the other's begin?[152]

Cross-cultural influences are particularly important in the development of rituals because rituals come out of a desire, or a need. This can come from a pre-established narrative made by one community, which makes it necessary for another community to have a response for that narrative. Another dynamic happens when one religious group has an answer to a problem that another group does not. For example, a satisfying response to the deadly cholera epidemic was not available in normative halakha; so Jews may consciously or unconsciously have looked to Christian and Slavic practices as the basis for a response. In Jewish folk practices, one could easily see the Black Wedding as an adoption of the cultural milieu's view of death and marriage as interlinked.

There is a longstanding relationship between the Black Wedding and Hasidic Judaism. Glenn Dynner's study of early Hasidism in Poland has shown that Hasidic Rebbes made cross-cultural folk practices such as singing and storytelling part of religious life, and were very open to adapting non-Jewish folktale motifs and melodies.[153] Michal Galas writes that the Hasidic movement was attractive to both Jews and Christians.[154] For example, the Baal Shem Tov, founding figure of Hasidism, was a popular figure in Christian stories, particularly in southeastern Poland. The stories show a keen interest not in the mystical expressions of Hasidism but rather the power of the religious authority. Galas cites one Hasidic tale told by Jews but indicating Christian interest:[155] A village was suffering from a drought. The Christian

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[152] Węgrzynek, "Shvartze Khasene," 63-64; Brown, *The Eleventh Plague,*189-190.

[153] Glenn Dynner. *Men of Silk : The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 217-226.

[154] Galas , "Inter-Religious Contacts in the Shtetl," 49.

[155] Galas , "Inter-Religious Contacts in the Shtetl," 50.

villagers carried their "idols" and paraded them around the town, but no rain came. The Baal Shem Tov called for a minyan (10 or more male Jews) and called for a fast. A Gentile asked why the minyan prayed for so long. One Jew said it was because they were praying for rain. The Gentile mocked him, and the man told the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov told the Jew to tell the Gentile it would rain. At the end of the story it did rain. The story indicates both the close contact between Jews and Christians and their awareness of each other's religious practices.[156] Additionally, there is evidence that Poles respected Rebbes.[157] The Rebbes had authority both in Jews' and non-Jews' eyes. Galas' argument in sharing these stories and other evidence is that researchers should not readily dismiss inter-religious practices.

The rise of Hasidism also brought new challenges– one of the most significant being: Who spoke for the community at large? This brings us back to the questions of competing authority discussed in chapter one. Through a variety of different means, different groups competed for the authority to speak for the larger Jewish community. Often attention is given to the Maskilim (Jewish advocates of secular education and greater Jewish integration into the majority society) and the Hasidim as groups who competed for authority. But as Benjamin Nathan points out, a less ideologically defined group, the merchant class, also needs to be taken into account.[158] Often the merchants were ignored by historical sources because they were not as concerned with leaving a historical record. However, the wealth the merchants accumulated was noted by the Russian government; this gave them scope to speak for the Jewish community writ large. The merchants were in regular contact with Jews and non-Jews alike. Such regular contact facilitated the flow of cultural practices between Jews and non-Jews. Because of the environment

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[156] Galas , "Inter-Religious Contacts in the Shtetl," 50.
[157] Galas , "Inter-Religious Contacts in the Shtetl," 50
[158] Nathan, *Beyond the Pale,* 39.

all three groups operated in, a wealth of new ideas could be spread to Jewish communities and incorporated into them, as well. As a result, Jews were inevitably aware of their non-Jewish neighbours and, in some ways, felt some social obligation towards them. This could also be seen as a problem by Hasidic authorities who were attempting to capture the largest following. For the Rebbes, coopting non-Jewish practices could have the potential impact of solidifying their authority as against the Maskilim or the merchant class. Early accounts of the Black Wedding often mention approval by Hasidic authorities.

Rites of Passage

Taking all this into account, understanding the Black Wedding requires examining the world in which the Ashkenazi Jews lived, building on Węgrzynek's model of analyzing Slavic Christian practices. As Jeremy Brown notes, a Black Wedding was performed in Palestine in 1860; it can then be understood that the Ashkenazi community was in contact with communities far beyond the Polish heartland that is Węgrzynek's focus. The Ashkenazi Jewish community, in Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe, overlapped with many Slavic cultures. Because Ashkenazi Jews shared space with their non-Jewish neighbours, there were shared practices that influenced their rituals. Looking at nineteenth-century rituals, one key similarity is the connection to life-cycles and the close association death has with marriage. While this concept was not entirely new to Slavic cultures, it is still worth examining in terms of cultural influences. The similarities suggest that the Black Wedding did not arise in isolation but rather developed within the broader context of modernity, an experience that both Ashkenazi and their Slavic neighbours navigated in the nineteenth century.

However, a word of caution is necessary in these examinations. As other scholars have noted, such a concrete line of influence cannot be drawn. While the overlapping similarities

provide insight into the cultural world that shaped the Black Wedding, it is equally important to consider thematic concerns that shaped these rituals. This analysis will explore different wedding traditions from the Slavic world. While this will not be an exhaustive list, it will highlight key similarities between the Black Wedding and other wedding practices.

Across both Slavic and Ashkenazi communities, there was a strong emphasis on social order, rites of passage, and the boundaries between life and death. Weddings, in particular, were viewed as liminal spaces between these two realms. These wedding rituals emerged within a similar period although their causes and reasons for being practiced all varied for different reasons. Their goals were all the same: Maintaining social harmony. The liminality of the wedding ritual served a dual purpose for both Slavic and Jewish communities. In both traditions, fulfilling rites and obligations was important. Within Jewish communities, it was important that in times of disaster, fulfilling a mitzvah was a powerful and necessary act.

First, this chapter will examine a traditional Russian wedding and its practices as they relate to the Black Wedding. Next, this chapter will explore the death-wedding ritual found in Romania, a practice that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Then, it will analyze the Plague's Wedding, a ritual observed in Southern Slavic communities. Finally, this chapter will compare these different wedding practices to identity common themes and influences.

Russian Weddings

In describing traditional Slavic weddings, Margaret Bessinger notes that laments often addressed concerns of patrilocality and the emotional struggle of becoming a stranger in a new place. Using folklorist Arnold van Gennep's theoretical framework, Bessinger highlights how wedding poems and laments reflect the key life-cycle stages of separation, transition, and

incorporation.[159] These poetic expressions mirror the broader cycle of life, illustrating how marriage serves as a pivotal transition from one stage to another. Further emphasizing this point, Bessinger notes a horizontal movement in weddings: one that brings families together. Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva expand on this idea, arguing that wedding rituals were primarily about fulfilling the needs of the community, with the bride's needs coming second.[160]. The expressions of sorrow of these pre-marriage laments suggest that weddings were not solely celebratory occasions but also moments of emotional and social transition.

Olson and Adonyeva write that in traditional Russian culture, a burial was comparable to a wedding. Both rituals involved a transition– death signified a reunion with one's ancestors, while marriage marked a move from one community to another. In both cases, the individual was symbolically separated from their former life. In rural Russia, the bride-to-be was expected to remain silent or express herself only through lamentations.[161] Christine D. Worobec notes that these lamentations often reflected the bride's unknown fate and were characterized by their funereal nature. According to Worobec, these laments served to teach the bride submission to her husband and in-laws. They could also be interpreted as reinforcing the deep symbolic connection between marriage and death. This connection suggests that rituals could be adapted to fit different social needs. While these lamentations were part of the pre-wedding traditions, other common wedding customs in Russian culture bear similarities with the Black Wedding. Such rituals often emphasized communal importance rather than emphasizing the bride and groom.

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[159] Margaret H. Betssinger, "Nature as Metaphor in Romanian and Slavic Ritual Wedding Poetry," *Philologica Jassyensia* 31, no. 1 (2020): 188. EBSCOhost.

[160] Laura J. Olson, and Svetlana Adonyeva. *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013) 112.

[161] Christine D. Worobec. *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period,* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991) 158.

Worobec notes that for a peasant wedding to gain legitimacy there were two essential elements: the religious ceremony and the community participation. In fact, a couple could marry without a formal religious ceremony and still avoid public censure as long as the community recognized the union.[162] The primary way the community sanctified the marriage was through a communal feast, which could last two to three days, according to Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby.[163] Only after the feasting could the marriage finally be consummated. Additionally, in the eyes of the community, the couple did not truly achieve adult status until they had children—adding new members to the community.

Examining 19th-century Russian peasant weddings gives insight into the underlying logic of ritual transitions. Even in a standard, non-crisis context, Russian weddings incorporated themes of separation, transition, and incorporation, concepts closely tied to death rituals. This highlights how marriage and death were intertwined in communal consciousness, reinforcing the idea that the Black Wedding did not arise in isolation but was part of broader cultural patterns. Rather than being a strictly Jewish practice, the Black Wedding fit within a broader community that utilized marriage and death as a protective force against ailments. Or that recognized marriage as an offering for a new way of life incorporated into the community. This also means that the Black Wedding was not a Jewish folk ritual meant to address only Jewish needs and concerns. As the cholera epidemic impacted every community, the Black Wedding was also a prophylactic ritual intended to protect the non-Jewish community.

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[162] Worobec. *Peasant Russia,* 162.

[163] Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby. *Village Values: Negotiating Identity, Gender, and Resistance in Urban Russian Life-Cycle Rituals* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2008) 46.

Southern Slavic Rituals

Scholars have studied wedding-death rituals in Transylvania, tracing their origins to the late 19th century, according to Gheorghita Geana.[164] Gail Kligman describes one such tradition which persisted at least into the 20th century. In this practice, a woman who had died was often married to Christ, [165] and a deceased male might be married to a woman volunteer.[166] Kligman explains that this ritual served to appease the dead and reinforce the boundaries between family, life and death. These weddings were typically performed when the death was considered outside of its proper time.[167] According to Kligman, the wedding was one means of satisfying the dead; if not, they would not rest and they would remain a menace to society. The wedding also had a sexual aspect in addition to a focus on mortality, representing a fulfillment of a life-cycle stage. The community could perform the death-wedding ritual as a corrective action.

Scholars differ in terms of their understanding of these wedding practices. Geana writes that this ritual was not truly a wedding but rather a funerary custom. He describes this practice not as a death-marriage, but a burial-wedding. He refers to this practice as the "Miortic wedding," because he believes the origins of the wedding come from a balled called "Miorita."[168] The origins of "Miorita" are unknown, as there are multiple versions. But the best-known version of this ballad has been documented since at least 1852.[169] The ballad tells the story of three shepherds (such as a Moldovan, a Transylvanian, and a Vrancean) in a pasture.

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[164] Gheorghita Geana, "The Mioritic Wedding: A Creative Ritual Solution to an Existential Crisis," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016): 16, EBSCOhost.

[165] Gail Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead,* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1988) 220.

[166] Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead,* 223.

[167] Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead,* 216.

[168] Geana, "The Mioritic Wedding: A Creative Ritual Solution to an Existential Crisis," 14.

[169] Mihaela Albu, "A Romanian Myth - Life as a Permanent Miracle," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 20, no. 2–3 (1997): 159. doi:10.3138/uram.20.2-3.157.

Two conspire to kill the third because he possesses more sheep. In different versions of this tale the conspirators against the shepherd are a Transylvanian and a Jew.[170] A ewe lamb warns the shepherd, and the shepherd accepts his fate, but expresses his desire to be buried in the middle of the sheepfold so as not to be separated from his flock. The shepherd, worried about how his mother will react, instructs the ewe to tell her:

> Just tell her
>
> I have married
>
> With a prince's daughter
>
> At heaven's gate.[171]

The ballad takes the themes of life stages and transition to a poetic level, in the shepherd's recognition of what is to come next and what state he will be in after his murder—that is, being one with nature. This relationship to his burial and nature is drawn out later when he allegorizes his death, telling the ewe to tell his mother who the wedding guests are:

> That in my wedding
>
> Sycamores and firs
>
> Were our guests;
>
> Great mountains for priests,
>
> Birds for musicians,
>
> Thousands of birds,
>
> And stars for torches...[172]

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[170] Andrei Oişteanu. *Inventing the Jew: Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romanian and other Central-East European Cultures*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 201.

[171] Vasile Alecsandri. "Miorita," trans Ernest H. Latham. *Miorita: An Icon of Romanian Culture.* (Portland, OR: The Centre for Romanian Studies, 1999)

[172] Alecsandri. "Miorita,"

This ballad blends folk imagination and traditions of Christian martyrdom to shape the symbolic significance of the death-wedding ritual in Romania. There is a stoic acceptance of one's fate, and a recognition that through marriage there is a change for everybody involved. Interestingly, Geana notes that in the death-wedding a person is buried with a fir tree on top of the grave,[173] perhaps as a reference to the ballad's lyric.

The death-wedding ritual occurred only with the mutual agreement of the families involved.[174] During these weddings, the living often addressed the dead. A striking aspect of the ritual is the inversion of symbols that seem to overlap between the space of the living and the dead. For example, in a typical Romanian wedding ceremony, guests wear bright attire, and a flagbearer carries scarves of vivid colours. However, in a death-wedding, the attendees dress in black as a symbol of mourning, while the deceased bride or groom is dressed in wedding clothing. Even the flagbearer uses black scarves instead of the customary vivid colours. Though the ceremony has all the structural appearances of a wedding, its participants are in mourning, symbolizing the intersection of these two life stages. Kligman highlights the central role of lamentations, which serve as a formalized way of expressing grief while reinforcing the cyclical nature of life and death.

Geana, examining other scholar's interpretations of the ballad, summarizes the ethnomusicologist Constantin Brailoiu's essay, "Sur une ballade roumaine (la Mioritza)," where he provides three key justifications for the death-wedding practice.[175] First, a wedding was a gift for the dead; the ritual was considered an offering, much like giving gifts and alms. Second,

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[173] Geana, "The Mioritic Wedding: A Creative Ritual Solution to an Existential Crisis," 14.
[174] Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead,* 225.
[175] Geana, "The Mioritic Wedding: A Creative Ritual Solution to an Existential Crisis," 17.

appeasing the dead: the gift and almsgiving were done to ensure the dead person was satisfied and would not potentially return as a malicious spirit. Third, the universality of marriage: marriage was viewed, by the community, as a fundamental life event that everyone should experience. Geana connects this third justification to the existence of child marriage, which was rooted in the pastoral way of life. He argues that these early marriages reflected broader existential cycles, where major life transitions, including death, were interwoven with community concerns.[176]

Nicolae Babuts, in an analysis of the Miorita ballad, notes that it was the murderers' responsibility to provide meaning to the shepherd's life.[177] This reflects a broader human tendency to create meaning in the face of tragic circumstances. Furthermore, Babuts highlights how the ballad conveys a sense of cosmic order to the world, suggesting that the death-wedding serves to restore balance within this framework. The ritual represents a symbolic delineation between life and death, with life standing triumphant.[178] As a ballad, Miorita carries a triumphant tone reinforcing the idea that the ritual was not merely an act of mourning but a successful fulfillment of cosmic obligations. The merging of life and death within the death-wedding serves a corrective action, offering meaning at a time when people were deeply reflecting on the value of life.

Rather than being an exceptional ritual performed only in response to unnatural circumstances, the death-wedding found its place among essential rites of passage. Robert Blauer notes that death often served as a reminder of social and psychological obligations owed to the

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[176] Geana, "The Mioritic Wedding: A Creative Ritual Solution to an Existential Crisis," 19.

[177] Nicolae Babuts. "A metaphoric Intercession in Miorita and the Arges Monastery." *Philologica Jassyensia* 21, no. 1 (2015): 17, EBSCOhost.

[178] Babuts. "A metaphoric Intercession in Miorita and the Arges Monastery." 28.

deceased.[179] Within this framework, the death-marriage was closely tied to the cultural importance of being married in life, and when that was not possible, the ritual acted as a way of fulfilling that obligation posthumously. The kinship bonds established through the death-marriage brought affected communities together. The ritual could serve as a way of bringing the community closer and providing a level of stability in areas with high mortality rates.

There is a universal association between kinship and death. Robert Blauer's paper, "Death and Social Structure," argues that the near-universal belief in ghosts in preindustrial societies stemmed from interpersonal relationships rather than simple naïveté or lack of sophistication.[180] According to Blauer, ghosts allow for the continuation of relationships. They presented the possibility of continuing social relationships with people who have deceased, for good or for bad. This belief in ghosts and interpersonal relationships is intertwined with the importance of life stages. The tension that interpersonal relationships and life stages create in Romanian society contributed to the development of rituals such as the death-marriage. This type of ritual bears many similarities to the Black Wedding while also exhibiting key differences.

The Black Wedding like the death-marriage has a close relationship with kinship within the community. Rather than primarily building connections between families, marriage serves as a bond between community members and the Divine. The primary intent is that, through Divine intervention, the epidemic will leave the community. The communal kinship is also apparent in the way the ritual strengthens unity through an act of charity: marrying off a bride, which brings good fortune to those who were once disenfranchised. The death-marriage also has a close connection to the Christian framework, as the deceased were often symbolically married to the

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[179] Robert Blauner. "Death and Social Structure." *Psychiatry,* 29:4.383. doi:10.1080/00332747.1966.11023480.

[180] Blauner. "Death and Social Structure," 381.

Divine. However, unlike the Black Wedding, this ritual was not intended as a prophylactic against disease for the greater community. Instead, it served as a public affirmation that the important rites of life would be performed for everyone, even in cases of premature death.

The Black Wedding also deals with life-stages and transitions. As mentioned above, one of the early precursors of the Black Wedding was a Christian ceremony in 1556, in which a wedding between two living individuals took place, but the attendees were the deceased, whose caskets had been exhumed.[181] This early precedent retained its deep connection to warding off epidemics, since the dead were seen as being sealed in a church, a life-affirming space. This act may have symbolized a demand for the deceased to respect the rites of passage associated with life and sacred spaces. Alternatively, it may reflect the idea that marriage itself is a transitory ritual. The inclusion of the dead acknowledges transitions, not only from one stage of life to another, but also from life to death.

Life-stages and transitions were also closely connected to nature and physical locations. Both Jews and their non-Jewish neighbours showed a keen awareness for nature as a metaphor. For example, in the Miorita ballad the serene pastoral life is presented, and through the lamb truth is revealed to the pure shepherd.[182] Margaret H. Bessinger notes that nature metaphors are used in several wedding songs in Eastern and Southeastern Slavic culture. In wedding songs they express how the couple will have new experiences together, often using the imagery of birds or other natural imagery.[183]

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[181] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 110.

[182] Ernest H. Latham. *Miorita: An Icon of Romanian Culture.* (Portland, OR: The Centre for Romanian Studies, 1999) 14.

[183] Margaret H. Beissinger, ”Nature as Metaphor in Romanian and Slavic Ritual Wedding Poetry,” *Philologica Jassyensia* XVI, no. 1 (31) (2020) 202-203.

According to Victoria Mochalova, the Slavic conception of the cemetery was as a closed space that protected against demons, epidemics, and other disasters. There was a strong division between the holy and unholy. The cemetery also functioned as a place for magic rituals intended to heal or purify the community.[184] The death-wedding was one such ritual, designed to avert demons and ghosts that might otherwise defile the community or the families of the deceased.

A notable Jewish parallel to these supernatural concerns is the idea of a dybbuk, which could be driven out by a ritual with many resemblances to a wedding. The dybbuk is like the demons that concerned Slavic culture. In this context, the death-wedding could be interpreted as a ritual designed to stave off such supernatural afflictions, essentially functioning as a form of protection against illness or demonic possession. The death-wedding functions similarly to a typical wedding. However, in this case, the community, through collective consent and in the presence of the Divine, seeks to bind the souls of the deceased beyond the grave. This binding is performed as a pre-emptive measure, intended to ward off otherworldly disease from entering the community. The idea that a wedding could serve as a means of warding off illness or disease suggests a powerful cross-cultural connection.

Both the death-wedding and the exorcism of the dybbuk evoked the conflict between holiness and impurity. As noted earlier, the wedding in Romanian culture was seen as an important rite of passage. If this rite was not fulfilled at the proper stage, the families would perform a wedding with the hope that they would stave off supernatural disturbances. The same logic applied to the exorcism of the dybbuk. In both cases the rituals involved significant transformations, crossing the boundaries of entry, exit, and consent on multiple planes. The

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[184] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 109.

shared practices also highlight shared cross-cultural influences between the fear of supernatural occurrences and the preventive actions taken through a marriage or marriage-like action.

Macedonian Folk Healers

One final point of interest is an unusual practice mentioned by Vesna Petreska: the "plague's wedding," which appeared in Macedonia in the late nineteenth century—although one might wonder if this is a wedding at all. This ritual involved two parts. In the first part, three widows would spin fabric at night. As they were spooling the fabric around the village, each starting from a different corner and meeting in the center, they would do so naked. The resulting cloth, called the plague cloth, was divided in equal parts for their families with the expectation that each family member would carry the fabric like an amulet.[185] In addition to having this "plague cloth," these three women would host a "plague's wedding" away from their community. They would invite the community to follow them bringing music, bread and wine. They would place the bottle in the spot they thought the epidemic went, and slowly, one by one each person would leave the "plague's wedding."[186] The belief was that the disease would follow the ritual and leave the community. This was a kind of trickery similarly done with vampires. The hope is that through inviting the vampire or plague to a wedding outside the village, the vampire, or plague, would not return.

This plague wedding presents an interesting approach to managing other-worldly forces, similar to what is seen in rituals like the death-wedding. However, in this case, the wedding takes place entirely on the supernatural plane, between the epidemic and the community. This type of wedding shares with the death-wedding a common fear of demons, ghosts and vampires. Like

[185] Petreska. "Deaf Wedding" 374
[186] Petreska. "Deaf Wedding," 374

the Black Wedding, the plague wedding is performed exclusively during an epidemic. By conducting such a ritual, the community attempts to establish and maintain a boundary between the space occupied by disease and the space of the living.

Across these three wedding practices, all emphasize the importance of life-death boundaries, and through the ritual of marriage, these boundaries are acknowledged and upheld. The Mioritic wedding and the plague wedding of the Macedonians also represent soft-antimonian acts because they were actions taken under extenuating circumstances. For the Macedonian community, this was a ritual done specifically during epidemics. The Romanian Mirotic wedding was a practice that only arose in the mid-19th century, and was only done for those who did not have the chance of getting married, rather than for those who chose not to marry.

Rites of Passage

The concept of rites of passage is set out in Arnold van Gennep's classic book, in which he proposes a structure for human life and assigns meaningful value to various rites. He emphasizes the societal importance of a transition from one stage to the next. One key takeaway from his work is that all societies use rites to mark transitions. Emilie Durkheim also highlights the centrality of ritual in human life. Durkheim argues that rites of passage are moments where an individual is determined to be an accountable being by the community-at-large. However, one limitation with Durkheim's view is that it does not fully address the possibility that the dead may continue to exist and influence the living. Van Gennep's framework, by contrast, offers a better understanding of the changes in group formation and social dynamics that lie at the heart of life/death rituals.

Van Gennep makes two key points regarding marriage as a rite of passage. First, he identifies marriage as one of the most significant social categories.[187] This importance stems from the fact that, in many societies, marriage involves a literal movement, one spouse leaving their family, clan, or village to join another. In certain traditions, this transition is not only between families but also between life and death, as in the case of the death-wedding. Or, a transition from death into life, as is so often the case in these case studies: the child "dies" through the marriage, becoming an adult. Marriage, therefore, holds profound significance not only for the individuals involved but also for the larger community. Second, van Gennep emphasis that marriage has always had an economic dimension.[188] While this is often understood in financial terms, the economic aspect can also take the form of social exchange. According to van Gennep, in some marriage traditions, there is a kind of substitution.[189] This could involve disguise, as in an Indian tradition where the bride temporarily dresses as the bridegroom and another girl as the bride.[190] Or, it could involve marrying off individuals deemed less valuable, like a child or an old woman. In any case, the intent of this substitution is to protect and preserve the status of a group. Marriage, in this sense, serves both as a social contract and as a means of maintaining communal balance.

Van Gennep further argues that marriage acted as a means of social disturbance. This meant that the impact extended beyond the two individuals to include their families and the larger community.[191] He draws a parallel between marriage and mourning, noting that the mourning stage functioned as a period of transition and a period of post-transition. In his

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[187] van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,*116.

[188] van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,* 119.

[189] van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,* 131.

[190] van Gennep cites Edgar Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India.* (Madras, India: Government Press, 1906) 3; van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,* 131n2.

[191] van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,* 132.

analysis, mourning rituals often resembled ceremonies associated with weddings, birth, and initiation.[192] These dynamics traditionally governed human interactions.

These rituals and their governance began to change with the advent of the nineteenth century. This was due in part the acceleration of technology allowing the world to begin feeling smaller. The rise of modern culture increasingly challenged the authority of traditional rites, unsettling the communal rhythms once rooted in both the natural and supernatural worlds. The Black Wedding like these other rituals sat at the confluence between modern sciences and folkloric "superstition." As the world became swept up in a progressing order so too did these rituals and their place in life.

The three wedding rituals found within these Slavic traditions mark an important point in rites of passage. E. R. Leach expands on van Gennep's concept, and notes that rites of passage often share similar characteristics.[193] For example, within traditional folk weddings, the bride-to-be sings lamentations that are reminiscent to a funeral. Similarly, in Romania, a funeral-like procession occurs, except that the bride or groom is deceased and dressed in wedding attire. This chapter has discussed the interconnection of life and death and the importance of maintaining these boundaries. However, for these boundaries to be upheld, rituals must also remain flexible.

This flexibility comes from the inherent liminality of the rituals themselves. Bjørn Thomassen defines liminality as "the experience of finding oneself at a boundary or in an in-between position, either spatially or temporally."[194] The liminality of these wedding rituals reveals an important point: rites of passage really should be rites of transition. In the nineteenth

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[192] van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,* 149.

[193] E. R. Leach. "Two Essays Concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time." in *Rethinking Anthropology*, 1st ed., 22:124–36. Routledge, 2004. doi:10.4324/9781003136460-6. 9

[194] Bjorn Thomassen, "Thinking with Liminality: To the Boundaries of an Anthropological Concept." In *Breaking Boundaries.* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2015), 40.

century, rapid social changes were occurring, including deadly outbreaks like cholera. The boundaries of life and death were breaking down. As the world transitioned into a more interconnected and modern place, these wedding rituals reflected that shifting reality. These weddings served as an attempt to redraw and reinforce the boundaries between life and death.

The Black Wedding emerged from a convergence of cultural, psychological and social transformations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this period, perceptions of life and death began to be porous, death was no longer seen as a final separation between the living and the deceased. As Robert Blauner argues, death disrupts social equilibrium, creating problems for the community.[195] The frequency of death due to epidemics led to higher unresolved familial, occupational and communal obligations. These disruptions, Blauner argues, explain the universality of ghostly phenomena—not merely superstition, but a means of reconciling these disrupted ties.[196] In this context, supernatural figures such as ghosts or dybbuks came to represent a failure in the expected life cycle, and they became an expression of the community's attempt to make sense of these disruptions. The spread of epidemics like cholera exacerbated these ruptures by producing large-scale losses that allowed for a competition between traditional healing practices and modern health practices. These conflicts intensified the communal disorder. In addition to the conflict between sources of knowledge there was also historical forces that exacerbated these tensions. With the annexation of much of Poland to the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century, the Jewish communities found themselves increasingly embedded in a multiethnic world. Through a process of cultural osmosis Jewish rituals began to modify

[195] Blauner, "Death and Social Structure," 379.
[196] Blauner, "Death and Social Structure," 381.

themselves. This is in part how a practice like the Black Wedding arose. This ritual was a communal response to reestablish respect between the boundaries between life and death.

This exchange can be seen in the evolution of the Black Wedding. As noted earlier, various cultures have performed special wedding rituals to mediate between the worlds of the living and the dead. Neither Jewish nor Slavic communities held a monopoly on ritualizing marriage to appease the dead or to ward off supernatural forces. Both cultures revered the boundaries between the dead and the living, and marriage provided a liminal space where those boundaries could, at least temporarily, be crossed.

Marriage and Death

The four rituals mentioned share a common theme of the marriage-death connection. First, marriage is a necessity within a tight-knit society. Second, marriage serves as an affirmation of life. Finally, the festive nature of these events holds greater significance for the community-at-large. Each of these aspects contributes to the perceived prophylactic powers of these weddings, whether in terms of healing, transformation, or ensuring social continuity. Utilizing van Gennep's framework[197] similar dynamics in Russian bridal laments can be observed, since they emphasize the transition from one stage of life to another by linking marriage to symbolic death.

Both bridal laments and the death-wedding share a deep connection to poetic tradition. Each ritual expresses the transitory nature of life and death. In the case of the death-wedding, this transition is framed as a triumph over death through the act of meaning-making. For the bride, the laments serve as an acknowledgment of a changing phase in life. In contrast, the Black

[197] van Gennep. *Rites of Passage,* 149.

Wedding reflects a broader, communal transition. One central expectation of the Black Wedding is that the ritual will bring about the departure of the epidemic from the community. It is also expected that the destitute couple will be incorporated into the normative community at-large. All these rituals recall the All Souls' Feast and the invitation of the dead to feast with the living. In the transformation of this feast, the beggars and destitute people eventually became a stand-in for ancestors.

By examining the close connection that Slavic wedding rituals can have with death. I have attempted to show that a ceremony like the Black Wedding did not come out of nowhere. Instead the cultural milieu through which the Black Wedding arose in the nineteenth century was a meeting of different cultural forces: the close association of death and weddings, the very real presence of the supernatural presenting itself as either demons or epidemics and the very tension of inter-ethnic relationships that Eastern and Central Europe provided throughout the nineteenth century. While I would like to show a clear line of influence between the Black Wedding and one of these practices, it is far more likely that these practices would have informed each other through cultural osmosis.

Chapter III - Accounts of Black Weddings

The Black Wedding has been reported through a multitude of mediums. With the evolution of each medium, the Black Wedding takes on specific traits that reflect the cultural influences and traditions of both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. As previously mentioned, the environment of the Shtetl, which gave rise to the Black Wedding, was one tightly defined by social order and position. At the same time, the non-Jewish world placed considerable importance on the symbolic connections between death and weddings. This complex interplay of cultural and social factors led to the development of the layered meanings behind the Black Wedding.

This chapter will examine and analyze how the Black Wedding has appeared in different sources. Natan Meir provides a historical framework of three periods through which the Black Wedding appears. Each of these three periods offers a historical context and a means of analyzing the sources of the Black Wedding. First by looking at the earliest sources of the Black Wedding, parsing the details of each account to show how the ritual's meaning transformed over time. Next, examining several brief accounts of Black Weddings that were recorded in the twentieth century, either in newspapers or in memorial books. Finally, analyzing a Black Wedding featured in a Hasidic tale – a story that is particularly significant because it reveals the deeper underlying impact of the ritual itself. Of these sources, the Hasidic tale provides us the most information about the couples who were married through a Black Wedding. These three areas together demonstrate how the Black Wedding has developed both as a historical reality and as a part of collective memory. Both history and memory are essential considerations when discussing ritual.

The study of ritual is complex, but to better understand the core of the Black Wedding, J.Z. Smith provides a simple but powerful definition of ritual: "A ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention."[198] The actions of the Black Wedding centre the marginalized couple in a way in which they had previously been overlooked. Historical accounts emphasize this focus on acknowledging the marginalized. Moreover, by comparing the more historical accounts with those presented in stories, this thesis shows how the ritual was intended to function and how the Black Wedding genuinely served as a kind of sacrifice.

Early Accounts

Jeremy Brown provides a story set in 1785, in which the Hasidic Rebbe Elimelech Weisblum of Lizhensk is said to have arranged a wedding between a poor woman and a water carrier:

> The Maggid of Kozhnitz [Yisrael Hopstein] played the violin and the Rebbe of Lublin [Yaakov Yitzhak Halevi Horovitz] was the jester. And on Friday night they entertained the bride and groom . . . Rabbi Shmuel [a disciple] was with Reb Elimelekh, and Reb Elimelekh suggested they go and entertain the couple. They stood outside and heard the Rebbe of Lublin reciting rhyming jokes and saw that everyone was dancing. Reb Elimelekh said "Look, there is fire that surrounds them all." Reb Elimelekh took a napkin and wiped the eyes of Rabbi Shmuel, and he could then see that indeed there was fire that surrounded them. Reb Elimelekh danced with them for more than an hour … and after he finished, he said "Master of the universe, on account of the mitzvah of these dances, may

[198] Jonathan Z. Smith, "To Take Place," in *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 103.

> we merit that at least one coal that awaits us at the entrance to Gehinom [purgatory] be extinguished."[199]

Here there are overlapping details with the standard Black Wedding which I presented in the introduction: an epidemic, a poor bride and groom, and "an emphasis on the joy and merrymaking that accompanied the wedding."[200] However, there are several issues with Brown's hypothesis. This wedding does not take place in a cemetery. Also, the account was published in an anthology, *Ohel Elimelekh*, by Avraham Hayyim Michelson published in Przemysl, Poland, in 1910. This means the event in question happened over a century before publication. Also, the story states that this took place at a time of cholera, but 1785 predates the earliest cholera epidemic in Europe.[201] Since cholera did not arrive into Europe until 1817, this indicates that the story has been contaminated by later events. Furthermore, Natan Meir showed how in later accounts of the Black Wedding, the religious and civil authorities became more cooperative. This alone suggests that the Rebbe's approval in the story is a later creation.

Another possible source for an early occurrence of an event like a Black Wedding comes from another Hasidic tale about a Rebbe, Rabbi Tsvi Hirsch of Rymanów (1778-1846), which was published in 1888. This tale provides evidence that the Black Wedding existed during the first cholera epidemic of 1831:

> In the year 5591 [1831] there was a cholera epidemic, which also came to Rymanów. And they carried out the known remedy of marrying a poor man to a poor maiden in the

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[199] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague*, 185.

[200] Brown, *The Eleventh Plague*, 185.

[201] Hamlin, *Cholera: The Biography* ,4; R Pollitzer, "Cholera Studies. 1. History of the Disease," *Bulletin of the WHO,* (10) 1954, 427.

> cemetery. When they were preparing to bring the groom and bride to the canopy, the bride became ill with that disease, and they told this to the Holy Rabbi Tsvi Ha-Cohen, may his memory endure in the world to come. Then he opened his holy mouth and said, As our tradition teaches, the corpse must be turned aside before the presence of the bride [if the two meet on the road] [*Kayma lan, ma'avirin et ha-met lifnei ha-kalah*] (BT Ketubot 17; also Mishneh Torah Shoftim: Avel 14:8), and she soon recovered from her illness and returned to her previous strength.[202]

Natan Meir offers his own two interpretations of this tale. In one, "the putative key to the termination of the epidemic [the bride] is at risk of being felled by it." The Rebbe only recites the Talmudic phrase after the bride has the disease. In Meir's second, more imaginative reading, "the force of the dictum is that death, here represented by the synecdoche of the corpse, must yield to the joy of a wedding." This second reason provides a religious justification for the Black Wedding. Both readings help us to better key in on some important details.

This account lacks some features of a typical Black Wedding but reveals key elements: the presence of disease, the remedy of marrying two disenfranchised individuals, and a public wedding procession. However, the prophylactic measures necessary for the Black Wedding are also threatened by the disease itself. The Rebbe's comment on the Talmudic expression underscores the cosmic order of life and death, emphasizing the bride's symbolic role as the boundary demarcation between the two. In this passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 17, before the quoted portion of the passage, the sages ask if it is permissible to look at a bride during the seven days of wedding celebration. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman reports that Rabbi

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[202] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 93-94.; Tsvi Hirsh Rymanower, *Sefer be'erot ha-mayim* (Przemyśl, 1894), 174.

Yonatan said it was permissible. However, the Gemara (the anonymous voice of the Talmud) interjects that the halakha is not in accordance with this opinion. With that context of looking at the bride, the Talmud transitions to the quoted passage in question. The corpse is expected to be moved to the side. This can be seen as a manner of joy taking precedence over mourning. In this case Rebbe Tsvi might be playing on this idea. However, the passage goes on to state that a bride is expected to move to the side for the King of Israel. In this case, honour has precedence over both joy and mourning. Drawing on both these latter cases, Rebbe Tsvi could be saying to death that joy and honour take precedence. The Rebbe's comment then is more about the joy of the wedding than any prophylactic measures. Notably, there is no mention of the ritual curing the community; the focus remains on the Rebbe's power to either remind death of the halakha or invoke his own charisma. This makes the wedding more ironic because it is not the bride who brings an end to the disease but the Rebbe's words, at least in the case of the bride herself. If the Black Wedding was not in fact an ancient ritual, then to say "the known remedy," would have reflected a later addition at the time of the story being written down. Parsing through the story and its context, it seems that the wedding and prophylactic measures were still separate from one another. The Rebbe's Talmudic invocation ultimately strengthens both his authority and the power of tradition. This interpretation deems the Black Wedding as a religiously justified act. Still, it is important to note that while this tale places the ritual's origin by 1830-31, there is no evidence supporting its historical accuracy.[203]

The Black Wedding here is tied closely to the power dynamics between the Rebbe and the community. In one obvious way, the story is about expounding on the Rebbe's powers. In the story immediately following this one as it was published, the same Rebbe, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh of

[203] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 94.

Rymanów, forcefully removes a man from the table; the story mentions the Rebbe's exhaustion after doing so. The story does not give a reason for why the Rebbe removed the man from the dinner table; however the men noticed that the Rebbe seemed tired as if he carried a heavy burden.[204] This pair of stories then emphasizes both the powers of the Rebbe and their limitations.

Another early account comes from the memoir of Wiktor Kopff (1805-1889), describing a wedding between two poor individuals during the 1849 cholera epidemic. This account is valuable both because it is early and because it comes from a non-Jewish source. The Black Wedding is only briefly mentioned: "In order to turn away the cholera, the Jews organized a wedding of two poor Jewish couples in the Krakow Jewish cemetery, taking up a collection for the dowry." Like many descriptions of Black Weddings in the early days, the description is terse. A follow-up anecdote from Kopff, however, proves rather interesting when juxtaposed with this one. He mentions, "Upon the arrival in Krakow of a certain Jew of whom rumor told that wherever he appeared, there too would appear the cholera, the Jews gave him gifts and persuaded him to leave the city."[205] Meir notes that the accuracy of this event is not as important as the repetition of negative tropes about Jewry. The example highlights that the Jewish community was aware of these stereotypes. Such a point also leads to seeing the Black Wedding not just as a ritual done for the sake of the Jewish community (insiders) but also for the sake of non-Jewry as well (outsiders).

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[204] Rymanower, *Sefer be'erot ha-mayim*, 174.

[205] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 95; Wiktor Kopff, *Wspomnienia z ostatnich lat Rzeczypospolitej Krakowskiej* (Kraków : Druk. "Czasu," 1906), 138.

Historical Development of the Black Wedding

From these early account and evidence, Meir suggests the Black Wedding may have originated in Austrian Galicia, as early accounts from Kopff and others are set in this region. In addition to these early accounts, Meir also found evidence of Black Weddings in eight localities within the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire between July and September 1866, with additional reports from Belz in Austrian Galicia, and Jerusalem.

The first wave of Black Wedding accounts often reflects tensions between common Jewish folk and the Jewish establishment. In one case, a rabbi forbade hosting the wedding in a cemetery; in another, town leaders tried to prevent Black Weddings from being organized. Meir suggests these objections aimed to avoid shaming Jews in the eyes of their non-Jewish neighbours.[206] This conflict between the common folk and the establishment was not uncommon, whether among Jews or non-Jews. During the 1830-31 cholera epidemic, there were several accounts of people rioting against authorities.[207] The riots came in part because of accusations that the government's containment efforts were in fact causing the disease, or the fear that doctors were poisoning the wells.[208] This pattern of tension continued in accounts of the Black Wedding found in 1892.[209] With the government intervening in a multicultural society, there was an inevitable sense of distrust between different communities and the government. All groups showed a keen awareness of each other in terms of how they responded to epidemics.

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[206] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 99.

[207] Peter Baldwin. Enter Cholera In *"Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830-1930*." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 57.

[208] Yury Bosin. "Russia, cholera riots of 1830–1831" In *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*, edited by Immanuel Ness, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 2877–2878.

[209] Anna Afanasyeva. "Quarantines and Copper Amulets: the Struggle against Cholera in the Kazakh Steppe in the Nineteenth Century" *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 61, no. 4 (2013): 489–90.

In the first chapter I examined the antinomian nature of the Black Wedding. There is evidence of rabbis pleading with community leaders to stop the practice, also evidence of Maskilim demeaning this as a custom that should not be continued.[210] The Maskilim's confusion and annoyance at seeing such a practice reflects their disappointment in normative Jewish law being turned aside for folk religious practices.

The second wave of Black Weddings came between 1892-1894. Riots and acts of violence persisted during this time, particularly in areas heavily affected by cholera. One explanation given for the violence was the higher proportion of lower-class individuals who became sick from the disease.[211] Examples of the type of violence included a medical assistant and pharmacist being killed, a policeman being maimed by villagers and a priest who tried to prevent all of this being chased out of town.[212] However unlike other ethnic groups, it seems that the Russian and Polish Jews did not respond with violence toward medical personnel. They did, however, show a distrust towards them. This was shown through their continued reliance on magical healing methods. Additionally, Meir notes that, in this period, communal leaders and rabbis became more involved in the Black Wedding practice. He cites one case where an orphaned girl and a beggar were married, but this occurred only after a recommendation by local rabbis. In another case, the community leaders were the ones who decided to perform a Black Wedding.[213] Meir notes that this change in the attitude of rabbis and leaders may be partly because the children from the time of the first wave of Black Weddings had now grown into adults. The practice had conceivably, in their eyes, become normalized.

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[210] Shimon Yehuda Stanislavski, "Letter from Ekaterinoslav," *Ha-karmel*, August 3, 1866, 123
[211] Frieden, "The Russian Cholera Epidemic, 1892-93, and Medical Professionalization," 544.
[212] Frieden, "The Russian Cholera Epidemic, 1892-93, and Medical Professionalization," 545.
[213] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 100.

Another important detail about this second phase of Black Weddings was the beginning of the couples revolting against such a wedding. Meir notes several accounts during this time period that mention that the treatment of the wedded couple afterwards was not always ideal. In one case the orphan groom, Leybele, went around begging for food and housing after the wedding.[214] This account is indicative of the fact that the couples' lives, in historical fact, did not always change as intended after the Black Wedding.

Black Weddings in Memorial Books

Many of the historical accounts of Black Weddings come from Yizkor books (memorial books) for Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust. Books in this genre were published to preserve the memory of Shtetls that had been destroyed and their Jewish survivors who had largely left Eastern Europe. They featured stories told by members of these communities of recollections from their respective community. This also creates a challenge, as Jeremy Brown and others have noted that recent memory acts as a filter for later recollections. Another issue with these historical accounts is that they are often recalled by people who were children at the time. These two factors make the memory generally reliable but unable to answer certain questions, such as the community's thoughts during the epidemics, the perspectives of the bride and groom, or what happened to the couple afterwards. They do provide evidence of how the Black Wedding came to be viewed by Jewish communities over time.

The first account this chapter will examine is from the memory book *Sefer Plonsk veha-Seviva* [(Memorial) Book of Płońsk and the Surrounding Area], published in 1963. The account is recalled by Motl Michalzohn, under the title "The Cholera Epidemic and the Wedding in the

[214] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 102; David Shifman, "Ma'asim be-khol yom: zamoshtsh," *Ha-melits*, April 20, 1894, 4.

Cemetery in the Summer of 1894."[215] Michalzohn was eight years old at the time of the epidemic. He mentions several attempts to prevent cholera outbreaks, including efforts to control the community's sanitation. He recalls the government trying to manage the disease by performing sweeps of the community affected by cholera, and that many people in the city, primarily Jews, fled to surrounding villages, living in tents outside the city.

He also describes the Christian response, where a special cemetery was created for cholera victims, while Jews continued to bury their own victims in the same cemetery as everyone else. Michalzohn notes that Płońsk had no hospital, and a makeshift hospital had to be made, with many rabbis supporting the effort. He writes that the only treatment available was boiling water. However, it seems the hospital was unsuccessful, and the police wanted to shut it down, sending the sick to isolation camps. However the action by the police infuriated the non-Jewish and Jewish communities, and it caused civil strife between the police and the general populace. The police eventually capitulated, allowing the hospital to remain open. During this time, Psalms were recited at the synagogue. Michalzohn recalls that the Jews did not trust the Gentiles and instead turned to prayer to cure the epidemic.

After several months, when the prayers seemed ineffective, community leaders decided to set up a chuppah (wedding canopy) in a cemetery. Michalzohn describes the Black Wedding as a "tried and true" method, suggesting that by then, the practice had become normalized. The groom was a beggar, and the bride had epilepsy. Michalzohn writes that the wedding was well-attended, but he is unsure whether the ceremony had any impact on halting the cholera epidemic, or if a change in weather was the real cause.[216]

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[215] Motl Michalzohn, "The Cholera Epidemic and the Wedding in the Cemetery in the Summer of 1894," in Sefer *Plonsk veha-Seviva*, ed. Shlomo Tsemach (Tel Aviv, Israel: Lidor, 1963) 135-136.

[216] Michalzohn, "The Cholera Epidemic," 136.

One striking aspect of this account is the tension between religious practices and the health practices of the time. According to Michalzohn, the medical approaches to halting the cholera epidemic were far below today's standards, and even some Jewish people found them inadequate. Motel's recollection of the memory suggests skepticism toward both human and divine intervention, with the weather change being the main factor in ending the epidemic. In this account, the focus is on the community rather than the individual couple. Despite the idea of preserving the Jewish lineage, the fact that the couple was older suggests they were unlikely to have children, raising questions about the purpose of the Black Wedding, and implying the Black Wedding had more of a function of a scapegoat ritual than a life proliferation one.

From Michalzohn's editorializing, the Black Wedding was seen less as a way to bring couples together to marry and have children, and more as a magical method for addressing the cholera epidemic. By the late nineteenth century, the traditional hierarchy of the Shtetl was still present, but this memory account does not mention the couple's life afterward. This could be due to the limitations of the memory book, but it also reflects the disintegration of traditional hierarchies. Motl Michalzohn's observation that the wedding was a "tried and true" method highlights the ironic view that the ceremony itself did little to stop the epidemic. This perspective is echoed in other accounts of the Black Wedding, suggesting that the ceremony may not have been viewed as effective. Michalzohn's views on human or divine intervention were likely shaped by tragic events like the Holocaust, which happened long after the cholera epidemic. His account reflects a transition within the Jewish community, moving from traditional forms of healing to modern medicine. The Black Wedding, in many ways, can be seen as an attempt to bridge this divide, merging traditional prayers with the newly introduced hospital practices.

A Cheerful Account of a Black Wedding

Mayer Kirshenblatt's memoir in words and paintings, *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust*, includes among his childhood memories an account of a Black Wedding. In fact, however, this wedding took place before he was born, and his vivid account is not an eyewitness one but a free retelling from a chapter in the memorial book for the Jewish community of Apt (Opatów).[217] He does mention that this is his source. Notably, this story is shaped by a post-Holocaust perspective, which adds layers of interpretation. Beyond the context of modern medicine, this account permits elements of magical thinking. While this does not mean the event did not happen, the prism of memory after such catastrophic events influences how it was recalled. Kirshenblatt writes:

> The memorial book for Apt recounts how another holy rabbi helped the town during a cholera epidemic in 1892. Every day someone died. In a community of about six thousand, that was a calamity. Prominent citizens went to the holy rabbi, imploring him to say a few prayers to the Almighty. Maybe the epidemic would subside. The rabbi thoughtfully replied, "Let's try a wedding in the Jewish cemetery. Perhaps the dearly departed will intervene with the Holy One to help." It is considered a great mitzva, or good deed, to help the poor to marry. All that was needed was bride and groom.

[217] Dr. Justin Jaron Lewis has helpfully reviewed the version, in the Yiddish language, in the Apt memorial book: Pinye Teytl, "A 'shvartse' khasene in Apt," in Zvi Yasheev, ed., *Apt: A Town Which Does Not Exist Any More*, Tel Aviv: Emigrants from Apt in Israel, the United States, Canada, Brazil, 1966 (digital edition, New York Public Library and National Yiddish Book Center, 2003), 106-107.

> The matchmakers got busy. In town there was a young bachelor who was supported by the community. His job was to clean the communal bath… In being approached, the young man gladly accepted.
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> Now a bride was needed. There was in town a young lady, an orphan… She was what is called kalekhdike yesoyme, a round orphan because she had absolutely no relatives... On being approached she also gladly accepted.[218]

In this more extended memorial account, the mention of an orphan is more specific. An orphan can be anyone who has lost just one parent. Hence the need to further clarify the bride-to-be's situation. There is also a common refrain: the greatest mitzvah is to marry a bride and groom (although this is a change from the more conventional wording that simply refers to marrying off a bride).[219] Finally, there is the transformation of the healing effects of the wedding. Now the wedding itself is not the sole act of healing. Rather the Rabbi's suggestion is the collective healing power of both the living, through fulfilling a mitzvah, and the dead, by their intercession, to drive away the plague with the assistance of the Divine. (The dialogue with the rabbi, and these rationales for the Black Wedding, are Kirshenblatt's own, not found in the memorial book.) The narrative continues,

> A proclamation was issued in the synagogue, the house of study, and the Jewish schools that a Black Wedding, a shvartse khasene, would be held in the cemetery at a designated time. Everyone was to attend. On the appointed day, the whole town, including people

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[218] Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *They Called me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish childhood In Poland before the Holocaust.* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2007) P. 13-15

[219] (Neither expression appears in the account in the memorial book.)

from the surrounding villages, streamed into the cemetery. They gathered near the oyel [אוהל , "a monument over the grave of an important person."[220]] The sexton brought a wedding canopy. The bride wore a donated wedding dress. The rabbi conducted the ceremony. Many people shed a tear on this solemn occasion.

The community donated gifts and food. … Everyone wished each other a long life. When the assembly was already a little tipsy, Yankl Krakowski, the badkhn, a master of ceremonies, stood on a stool and announced that the time had come to call out the wedding gifts. Seeing as this poor couple had no home, the appeal went out for cash donations. Everyone reached into his or her pocket, and in a short time, the iron pot was full of money… the band stuck up a lively tune, and everyone—men, women, and children—danced. Reb Tsvi Hirsch, who officiated at the wedding, stepped into the large circle of dancers… began to dance. He invited the newlyweds to join him in the obligatory mitsve-tants. The merriment continued late into the night. Sure enough, the cholera epidemic subsided in a few days.

This account stands out for its vivid and positive portrayal of the Black Wedding. Unlike other memorial accounts that emphasize harsh or grim imagery, this one reflects a sense of communal joy and optimism. The details – like the donated dress, the collective generosity, and the celebratory dancing – highlight the community's investment in the ritual. There is also a mention of an *oyel,* likely marking the grave of a holy man. Setting the wedding in such a location would further emphasize the connection between magical powers of a Rebbe and the Black Wedding ritual.

[220] Definition of אוהל from verterbukh.org.

Evidently this recounting also adds another layer of memory, as the original account in the memorial book of Apt makes no mention of the efficacy of the Black Wedding. It ends with the celebration continuing "late into the night"; Kirshenblatt has added "the cholera epidemic subsided within a few days." This shows how later accounts which had normalized the practice of the Black Wedding saw it as a more effective remedy against the disease than earlier accounts. This also impacts retellings like Mayer Kirshenblatt's retelling of this particular Black Wedding.

A Black Wedding in Winnipeg

Another important source for later accounts of the Black Wedding comes from newspapers. One such example is an article from November 11, 1918, in Winnipeg, Manitoba:

> "The wedding of Death," an ancient Hebrew ceremony established about 2,000 years ago to stay the ravages of a plague, was celebrated at East Kildonan cemetery this afternoon, as a sacrifice to stay the "flu" epidemic.
>
> Hebrews and Gentiles alike were present to witness the ceremony.
>
> It was the first wedding under the old orthodox religion ever staged in Canada, it was claimed. Prohibited at all other times, the ceremony was held at the orders of Rabbis Kahanovitch and Gorodsky.
>
> The wedding was most elaborate and had been planned for more than a month.
>
> At one end of the cemetery, a quorum of ten Jews conducted a funeral. At the other, 1,000 Gentiles and Jews witnessed a wedding.
>
> The ancient Jewish "Song of Life" was played. On the west side of the cemetery, at the same time, Jews were chanting the wall of death, as a body was committed to the grave.

> Harry Fleckman and Dora Wiseman were the contracting parties at the wedding. Rabbis Kahanovitch and Gorodsky officiated.
>
> Following the ceremonies, services were conducted by the rabbis. Ancient Jewish chapters reserved for these ceremonies were chanted by the rabbis, and so repeated by all Jews present as the wedding procession marched out of the cemetery.[221]

On the surface many of the features noted by Natan Meir appear in this account. Notably, there is no visible social tension between the leadership and the lay community in this report. Although the report does not mention any social tension, there may have been tension behind the scenes. Allan Levine's work on the history of Winnipeg Jewry includes a biographical sketch of Rabbi Kahanovitch and Rabbi Gorodsky.[222] Rabbi Kahanovitch was initially a popular figure in Winnipeg. He was born in 1872 in Lithuania. He accepted a position as the Rabbi at the Beth Jacob Synagogue in the North End of Winnipeg after serving in a similar position in Scranton, Pennsylvania around 1906. Rabbi Kahanovitch was described as an Orthodox Shtetl-style rabbi and eventually came to be known as the "Chief Rabbi of Western Canada." Despite his grand title he was dependent on donations and subsidies for his duties throughout his life. Rabbi Kahanovitch was known for inflexibility in religious practice. Allan Levine cites one example where Rabbi Kahanovitch was asked to speak at the anniversary of the opening of a Jewish orphanage. Although the orphanage was following Jewish law, they allowed girls to sing in the choir. Upon arriving at the event and hearing girls sing in the choir, Rabbi Kahanovitch verbally berated everyone saying that a continuation of this action would lead to further apostasy. His

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[221] "Hebrews Hold 'Wedding of Death' to Halt 'Flu,'" *Winnipeg Evening Tribune,* November 11, 1918. https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm:1690755

[222] Allan Levine. *Coming of Age: A History of the Jewish People of Manitoba.* (Winnipeg, MB: Heartland Associates, 2009), 135-139.

strict religious rulings, and a quarrel with some kosher butchers in 1911 over his role on regulating kosher slaughtering, eventually led to Rabbi Gorodsky's arrival as the rabbi of several synagogues. Levine writes that the two rabbis disagreed on several issues, though he only discusses issues regarding Zionism in depth.[223] The fact that someone like Rabbi Kahanovitch who was strict in religious practice participated in a ritual like the Black Wedding suggests either the normalization that Natan Meir has noted after the first wave of the cholera epidemic, or the necessity for support from the community for the sake of his own financial support. The article mentions that such a wedding was prohibited at all other times. Presumably this is because a Black Wedding would only take place during an epidemic. But it might also have to do with the fact that Rabbi Kahanovitch, being a Kohen, was prohibited from contact with the dead, such as entering a cemetery. This makes Kahanovitch's involvement ironic, considering his strong orthodox stance toward halakha. His involvement shows how the Black Wedding has soft-antinomian characteristics. Evidently the fact that two rival rabbis, Rabbi Kahanovitch and Rabbi Gorodsky, co-officiated speaks to some potential community strife and the need for unity within the community.

Another article, from the *Winnipeg Free Press* from November 12th, 1918, about this same wedding, provides more subtle details about the wedding and the response of the community:

> In ancient days when a pestilence fell upon the people of Palestine, there was a ceremony firmly established among the customs of the Hebrews, which, if performed in a proper and devout manner was believed to exorcise the plague. The custom was a very

[223] Levine. *Coming of Age,* 139.

weird one and most impressive, and was known as a “sacrificial wedding.” The ceremony has been passed down from generation to generation, and although it is little more than a vague story to the young Hebrews of today, their parents, many of them, remember the time when a sacrificial wedding was celebrated in the homeland in an effort to stay the ravages of cholera or some other plague.

The strange wedding ceremony was seen yesterday for the first time in Western Canada, and the scene was laid in Winnipeg. There is still a great deal of superstition in the world and although the younger generation of local Jews for the most part regard the sacrificial wedding as nothing more than a superstition, the older people still pin an incredible amount of faith to it. They have become alarmed at the spread of the Spanish influenza epidemic, and resolved to celebrate the ancient wedding ceremony in the hopes of ending the pestilence.

The Rabbis knew that the performing of the unique marriage ceremony would have a good effect on the people, giving them greater faith and optimism, and they therefore sanctioned the people’s desire. A young couple was, therefore, chosen to take the principal part in the sacrificial wedding.

Harry Fleckman and Dora Wiseman of Salter Street and Selkirk Avenue were to have been united in marriage with all the Jewish rites and ceremonies, but they willingly sacrificed all these in a generous endeavor to save mankind, as they thought, from the dread pestilence now sweeping the earth.

Weddings, in the usual sense of the term, are joyous affairs, where sadness has no place. The sacrificial wedding is, however, a ceremony of an entirely different nature, and the gladness has along with many other rites, been forfeited.

With the strange setting of a cemetery, Winnipeg's sacrificial wedding yesterday was a ceremony doleful and weird. Hundreds of faithful Hebrews gathered in the Shaarey Zedek cemetery at three o'clock and many Gentiles were there to witness for the first time the performing of the singular religious rite from the past.

Standing amid the grim gravestones, with a canopy over their heads, the bride and groom were united in holy matrimony by Rabbis Khanovitch [sic] and Gorodsky. The usual marriage ceremony was chanted according to the strange Jewish customs and soft music, with an element of mysticism and weirdness was heard.

With a voice full of emotion an old gentleman made an impassioned address to the people closely assembled around the bride and groom. Even to those ignorant of the Hebrew language [sic – the speech was more likely in Yiddish] it was quite evident he was speaking of the sufferings of his people, and was appealing for aid. His eloquence brought tears to strong men's eyes and women moaned and sobbed audibly, adding to the strangeness of the scene. Those present were most generous when the hat was passed around for money for Jewish sufferers, and with this act of charity, the strangest of all wedding ceremonies was closed.

A funeral, which entered the cemetery toward the close of the wedding emphasized the weirdness and dolor of the sacrificial marriage ceremony, and made it much more difficult for the foreigner to understand and appreciate the strange custom revived from the dim past of an ancient race.[224]

[224] "Sacrificial Wedding to Stay the Plague." *Winnipeg Free Press* , November 12, 1918 . https://access-newspaperarchive-com.uml.idm.oclc.org/marriage-clipping-nov-12-1918-5088757/

The *Winnipeg Free Press'* article brings up interesting issues of history and memory. Evidently from the article, the author of the article, and perhaps the community, mistakes the ritual for being far more ancient than it was. Like Rabbi Kahanovitch, the community who participated in this ceremony were likely people who had grown up after the first wave of the cholera epidemic in the 1860s, which could explain why the practice had acquired a sense of established tradition– like the "tried and true" method described in the memorial account mentioned earlier. The article also makes mention of the word "sacrificial wedding" which is in line with how the wedding began to be perceived by the wedded couples, according to Natan Meir.

The article also complicates the relationship the Rabbi has with the community: "The Rabbis knew that the performing of the unique marriage ceremony would have a good effect on the people, giving them greater faith and optimism, and they therefore sanctioned the people's desires."[225] This shows that the wedding was ultimately a desire of the people, with the rabbis acquiescing. As mentioned in chapter one, there were always battles around who spoke for the Jewish people. Evidently the acquiescence of the rabbis to this demand shows the need to balance not only what the rabbis know, but also what the people want. Rabbi Kahanovitch evidently would have needed to temper any objections he might have had to this ceremony. Lastly, from this article there is a bit of clarification about the funeral mentioned in the first article. From this article it seems that the funeral might not have been something planned to happen with the wedding; their timings merely overlapped.

One final thing noted about this wedding was the involvement of Gentiles. Both articles mention the participation of community members, Jews and non-Jews alike, who had

[225] "Sacrificial Wedding to Stay the Plague," 5.

presumably been invited to attend. The invitation is particularly noteworthy because historical criticisms of the Black Wedding have included fears of what non-Jews would think of this ritual. Evidently, in the November 12th *Winnipeg Free Press* article, the recurring choice of the word "weird" does not necessarily convey a good impression that outsiders might have had of this ritual. However, couching this ritual with terms like "ancient ceremony" or "ancient race" provides a level of prestige and perhaps protection.

"Wedding Presents"

Now that this chapter has examined some of the historical accounts of the Black Wedding, we turn to a longer Hasidic story that features the Black Wedding. The first accounts are shared to provide us with historical understanding, but this Hasidic tale gives us an understanding of the mechanisms that lie beneath the Black Wedding. Everything mentioned from the previous chapters points to these underlying mechanics; therefore, this section will review some of the conclusions of the first two chapters as well as adding new insights.

This account of a Black Wedding comes from a story titled, in Justin Jaron Lewis' translation, "Wedding Presents."[226] The story first appeared in print in a Hebrew-language collection, *Meqor Hayim*, in 1911, presumably based on oral tradition in the Yiddish language. This account exemplifies the power of the sacrifice, the relationship the Rebbe has with the community and the relationship the Rebbe and community have with the Polish nobility. The story is also a celebration of folk customs and preserving the cosmic order of the Shtetl and the cosmic order of Jews to non-Jews. The story also emphasizes people who would normally be

[226] Justin Jaron Lewis, *Imagining Holiness,* 27-31.

marginalized in the community. “Wedding Presents” shows the Black Wedding as a sacrifice and gift giving.

The story begins in the town of Tsanz (Nowy Sącz, now and historically in Poland, at the time of the story part of Habsburg-ruled Galicia). The Hasidic rebbe Reb Hayim (Hayim Halberstam, 1793–1876) flees the town during an epidemic. Before he leaves, he instructs the townspeople to perform a Black Wedding. After the epidemic ends and Reb Hayim returns to town, he meets the town bride and groom. He says that he will give them a wedding present after sharing a story. The story he tells is about two servants who did not have enough money to wed. They worked for a tavernkeeper until he could no longer pay them, forcing them to move to a different town. Eventually, they found the tavernkeeper reduced to begging. The young male and female servants took the money they had saved and gave it to their former employer. The condition for the female servant’s generosity was that the male servant marry her. However, since they still lacked sufficient funds, they were reduced to begging to raise their wedding expenses.

Rebbe Elimelech (this is Elimelech of Lizhensk, 1717-1787, mentioned earlier in this thesis), seeing this (through a spirit of prophecy), decided to visit the two servants. Meeting the young couple, Reb Elimelech decided they were good and should marry, and immediately set up a wedding canopy in a tavern. The young Reb Naphtali of Ropczyce (1760-1827, later a Rebbe in his own right) became the master of ceremonies for the wedding banquet, and began announcing the wedding presents. After several of the Hasidim promised extravagant gifts to the couple, the Rebbes asked the tavernkeeper what gift he would give the couple. The tavernkeeper scoffed at the suggestion that he needed to give them a gift beyond hosting the wedding, and saw

the promised gifts of the Hasidim as jokes. Upon hearing this, Reb Naphtali of Ropczyce promised the couple the tavern itself and its distillery.

Later that evening, when the newlywed couple were on the road together, they found a Polish nobleman in need of rescue. After saving him, they returned him to his mansion. As a reward, the nobleman's father and family gave them generous gifts – an entire village along with other gifts, miraculously corresponding to what had been promised by the Hasidim in the tavern. Among their possessions, they discovered the deed to the tavern had also been signed over to them. When the tavernkeeper realized this, he approached Rebbe Elimelech, hoping to stay in his post at the tavern. Rebbe Elimelech scolded the tavernkeeper, telling him that he should have given the couple a gift when he had the chance.

Concluding his story, Reb Hayim told the couple married through the Black Wedding ceremony that he too, was giving them a village, just like the wedding presents in the story he had shared. Indeed, we are told (without further details) that the couple came into possession of that village. Subsequently it is presumed the couple lived a comfortable life in this new position of wealth and power.

The Marginalized and Others

The story exemplifies the power of a folk ritual like the Black Wedding and the intended effects for those who witness the ritual. Both couples are relatable. They show a championing of moral virtues by the end of their stories: the servants do not commit sexual sin, despite their precarious situation; the marginalized couple in the cemetery save the community and are brought to a normative level signifying a cosmic reconciliation. Additionally, the Rebbes in both stories solidify their powers with both the nobility and the marginalized by ensuring a trusted individual works the tavern, and with a tacit approval of folk practices. Both stories show the

marginalized couples are redeemed through the charismatic powers of the Rebbe, and by the community under the direction of the Rebbe.[227]

Marginalized people are often the focus of Yiddish literature set in the Shtetl, as in the works of Mendele Mocher Sforim and Sholem Aleichem. The marginalized are deeply entwined with Jewish thought on the body. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, for example, used storytelling as a method of teaching his followers. In his story "The Seven Beggars,"[228] the disabilities of the beggars play an integral role in Rebbe Nachman's overall point about perfection. Their disabilities are, in fact, their perfection in this story.

In the tale of the Seven Beggars, two wandering orphans, a girl and a boy, encounter seven beggars who each give them bread. The children eventually join a larger group of beggars, who all decide that these two new beggars should be married. On each day of the wedding the children (now a wedded couple) are blessed by one of the seven beggars who met them earlier, and told a tale. Each beggar emphasizes that though he has a disability, his disability is in fact an illusion and sign of his perfection.

Howard Schwartz proposes that each beggar represents an important figure in the Bible:

> the blind beggar represents Isaac, who became blind; the deaf beggar represents Abraham, who was deaf to the noise of the world, so intently was he focused on his Covenant with God; the beggar who stuttered represents Moses, who describes himself in the Torah as slow of speech, and of a slow tongue (Ex.4:10); the beggar with the crooked

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[227] Lewis, *Imagining Holiness,* 27-31; "The Happy Pair and the Baal Shem Tov," in *Yiddish Folktales* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1997)

[228] Nachman of Breslov, "The Seven Beggars," short story translated by Aryeh Kaplan, in *The Seven Beggars: & Other Kabbalistic Tales of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov* (Woodstock, VA: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 1–84.

> neck represents Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel— as the high priest's duty is to unite Israel and God, and his affliction focuses on the neck, which links the head (God) to the rest of the body (Israel); the hunchbacked beggar represents Jacob, whose hunchback symbolizes the power of "the small that contains the great," just as Jacob is identified in the Aggadah (rabbinic legends) as the pillar that supports the entire world; the beggar with no hands represents Joseph, a master of spiritual powers; and the seventh beggar, who has no feet, can be seen to represent the Messiah, who has not yet come— his arrival will initiate the era of the "footsteps of the Messiah."[229]

In this interpretation the disabilities of the beggars can be seen as allusions. As Schwartz and many other scholars have pointed out, the tale draws highly on kabbalistic ideas. Schwartz writes that "The Seven Beggars" can be read as separate stories or as a single story. This in many ways fits with the story of "Wedding Presents." However, when each of these tales are read as a singular story their meaning is layered on top of each other. In Rabbi Nachman's story, the beggars with disabilities are reminders of the great figures of the Bible and the awaiting of the Messiah. In the story "Wedding Presents" the marginalized and begging poor people are representative of social pariahs who recognize and are rewarded for following the directives of their Rebbes. The recurrence of the marginalized body is essential for understanding the development of the Black Wedding.

Throughout this thesis has shown that Jewish communities were in close contact with their non-Jewish peers. At the same time, the sad reality is that Jews were often marginalized historically. In the course of my broader research on Judaism and epidemics, I read Samuel

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[229] Howard Schwartz, *A Palace of Pearls: The Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 142-143.

Usque's book *Consolação às Tribulações de Israel*, which provides examples of the persecution of Jews throughout history—already from his perspective in the 16th century. Often, this marginalization placed particular emphasis on the Jewish body. For example, according to Sander Gilman, when Christian Wilhelm von Dohm (1751-1820) called for the emancipation of Jews, Johann David Michaelis answered that Jews could not become true citizens because they were too small to be soldiers.[230] In addition to criticisms about height there were also claims that Jewish people had flat feet and would be unable to march for long periods of time. Any bodily mark was used to separate the Jewish community from the larger community. This focus and exclusion have also had harmful consequences, such as Jews being blamed for epidemics like the Black Plague and other calamities. The imposition of blame had a cumulative effect on how the marginalized were perceived. For example, a Yiddish memoir by a male author published in 1899 describes the bride in the Black Wedding he witnessed as someone whose presence could induce vomiting.[231] Many potential brides and grooms eventually refused to participate in the ritual, partly because of how they were perceived by the broader community.[232] In contrast, "Wedding Presents" models a respectful, supportive treatment of the Black Wedding couple.

The Rebbes mentioned in the story both shared a special interest in the marginalized. They also both faced challenges to their authority from the Mitnagdim (traditionalist opponents of Hasidism) and from other Hasidic leaders. For example, Rebbe Hayim had a famous dispute with the successors of Rebbe Israel of Ruzhin. Rebbe Hayim and his followers emphasized traditional learning, while the followers of Rebbe Israel of Ruzhin embraced a life of luxury.[233]

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[230] Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 40.

[231] Avraham Shalom Friedberg, *Sefer ha-zikhronot* (Book of memoirs), Warsaw, 1899, 2:75, quoted in David Assaf's notes to Yekhezkel Kotik, *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl : The Memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik*, Wayne State University Press, 2002, 472-473 n. 5.

[232] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 113-114.

[233] Pnina Meislish, "Halberstam," 264.

Rebbe Hayim wrote several letters denouncing their lifestyle. The dispute eventually faded, but not before there were threats of excommunication and involvement from rabbis of both the Hasidim and Mitnagdim. Throughout his life, Rebbe Hayim emphasized the importance of charity and criticized Tzaddikim who lived in luxury. These principles help explain why the Black Wedding would have been attractive to Rebbe Hayim: it emphasized the marginalized rather than elevating the wealthy. The Black Wedding could also be perceived as an act of charity, as giving a bride away is frequently described as one of the highest forms of charity in Yiddish literature.

Rebbe Elimelech was also known for his connection to the marginalized. He gained a reputation for travelling from village to village. Two interpretations of his travels are commonly given: representing the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence in exile) and promoting repentance. In the story "Wedding Presents," the latter interpretation aligns more closely with the narrative. Later in his life, Rebbe Elimelech was an ascetic and taught about the importance of the Tzaddik ("righteous person", spiritual master). A Tzaddik was more than a religious leader; they led in all aspects of life and were believed to have a higher spiritual status than even the seraphim. The tzaddik's authority came from their connection to the divine and their support from the community.[234] Although Rebbe Elimelech did not have a famous dispute, he often defended himself against objections from the Mitnagdim, who criticized his followers for praying according to a version of the Sephardic rite instead of the Ashkenazi rite traditional in Poland. Both Rebbes emphasized the relationship between their knowledge, power, and authority and their community. Their actions often highlighted marginalized members of the community. It is

[234] Esther Liebes,"Elimelech of Lyzhansk," in *Encylopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol 6 (Detroit: MacMillian Reference USA in association with the Keter Publishing House, 2007) 348.

fitting, then, that a tradition like the Black Wedding would feature in a story involving these two Rebbes.

The proper, though not necessarily common, treatment of the Black Wedding couple is emphasized in "Wedding Presents." When Rebbe Hayim tells a story of another couple he is also modelling how the town bride and groom ought to be treated. This is especially evident in the role of the tavernkeeper who hosts the wedding in that story. Though Rebbe Elimelech instructs the tavernkeeper to offer a wedding present to the servant couple, the tavernkeeper refuses, believing that offering food and the use of his tavern for the feast suffices as a gift. This speaks against the expectations of the Black Wedding, which Rabbi Hayim is attempting to teach. The gift is not a temporary one; it is meant to sustain and support the bride and groom throughout their life.

Folk Practices

Many early accounts of the Black Wedding come from Hasidic tales; as such, there is a strong association of the Black Wedding with Hasidism. As mentioned earlier, three groups were vying for authority to speak for the Jewish community: the Hasidim, the Maskilim, and the merchants. Glenn Dynner notes that while stories often portray the Rebbes as aligned with the lower classes, historically they were associated with the Jewish upper class.[235] The Rebbes had an important responsibility to appease the elites while also appealing to the widest mass audience possible. With the permission of the elite, the Rebbe would have the autonomy to work as they pleased. Those who believed in the Rebbe would enjoy blessings either economically or spiritually through the Rebbe's power. This required the Rebbe to keep an ear to the feelings of

[235] Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

the masses. From the start of the Black Wedding ritual, the marginalized and lower classes supported the practice. Over time, it became more accepted by the upper class. Nevertheless, for a Rebbe to receive consent from the masses, he also had to ensure he gave them his support.

The story "Wedding Presents," is set during Rebbe Hayim's tenure as a Rebbe in Tsanz[236] between 1830 and 1876. This would situate the story during the cholera epidemic of 1865-1866. Nevertheless, the story seems less focused on curing disease and more on sustaining the bride and groom. Epidemics were never seen as independent events but were often connected to some form of sin. However, once the disease spread, it did not discriminate between sinners and non-sinners. Thus, the Black Wedding ritual became closely tied to righteousness and the Rebbe's power.

Rebbe Hayim's teachings emphasized traditional learning, but his support of the Black Wedding reveals a level of flexibility in supporting or appropriating "invented traditions" – ones with a manufactured sense of ancientness. In another story Rebbe Hayim seemingly makes up a blessing on the spot regarding eating bitter herbs over the seder plate.[237] When Rebbe Hayim came to the point of the traditional blessing saying "and commanded us," he remembered that he was under doctors' orders not to eat the bitter herb as usual, and instead concluded with the words "you shall take great care of your lives."[238] As Justin Jaron Lewis notes, this is "a biblical phrase… [from] Deuteronomy 4:15. In rabbinic interpretation, though not the biblical context, this is a commandment to take care of one's life and health."[239] Faced with an unfamiliar situation, Rebbe Hayim, while using phrases from the tradition, seemingly created an innovative

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[236] The Encyclopedia of Hasidism, Tzvi M. Rabinowicz (1996), "Halberstam, Hayyim, of Nowy Zanz."
[237] Lewis, *Imagining Holiness,* 152-153.
[238] Lewis, *Imagining Holiness,* 152 ff. 48.
[239] Lewis, *Imagining Holiness,* 301.

new blessing, something prohibited by traditional halakha. This practice however is also consistent with Rabbi Kahanovitch of Winnipeg, who was seemingly unbendable when it came to innovations and yet officiated in a nineteenth century innovation himself.

Glenn Dynner has argued that the widespread popularity of Hasidism in Eastern Europe owed a lot to the openness of Hasidic Rebbes to folk practices, including non-Jewish influences.[240] In "Wedding Presents," Reb Hayim's approval of the Black Wedding illustrates Dynner's idea in action. The rebbe utilizes this folk practice to solidify his authority. In many ways, the Black Wedding acts as an "invented tradition."

Invented Tradition

In the first chapter, I explored Shaul Magid's ideas of antinomianism and concluded that the Black Wedding exhibited elements of breaking normative ritual, though ultimately this was done to ensure a return to normalcy. I noted instances where the Black Wedding seemingly permitted marriages that would not typically be allowed under regular Jewish law. Part of the Black Wedding's capacity to do so lies in its novel origins, which are shrouded in mystery, like the wedding that took place in Winnipeg.[241] As an invented tradition, the Black Wedding emerged during periods of social upheaval. Hugh Trevor-Roper's "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland" demonstrates how seemingly ancient sartorial practices such as kilts and distinctive clan tartans were invented to help stabilize society amid rapid social change.[242] Similarly, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were times of significant upheaval

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[240] Glenn Dynner. *Men of Silk : The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 217-226.

[241] "Hebrews Hold 'Wedding of Death' to Halt 'Flu,'" *Winnipeg Evening Tribune,* November 11, 1918. https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm:1690755

[242] Hugh Trevor-Roper. "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*, 15-41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

for Ashkenazi Jews. With competing factions– Jewish leaders and non-Jewish authorities, religion versus science, Hasidic authorities versus Maskilim and merchants – the Black Wedding provided a stabilizing response, affirming tradition in the face of modern secularism and uncertain medical practices.

The development of the Black Wedding also reflects a distrust of secular medical innovations.[243] The cholera epidemic coincided with increased global interaction, which brought about challenges to old dogmas. As communities sought validation for their traditions amid this upheaval, the Black Wedding emerged as a reaction against both secularism and previous healing practices.[244] The practice became most prevalent during the cholera epidemic when medical innovations were largely experimental and ineffective against the disease. The Black Wedding combined two apparent forces of life: marriage and marginalization. These two forces were combined into a form of scapegoat ritual because they ran on the assumption that the marginalized were the cause of the disease, and they were in essence pinning their hopes of staying the epidemic on them. If the epidemic was not stayed, the couple would be blamed for its continued promulgation. This synthesis of seemingly opposing elements allowed figures like Reb Hayim in "Wedding Presents," to assert their authority through the ritual's successful completion.

The Black Wedding's powers were affirmed by embracing folk customs and drawing the community closer together. The community's hopes for eradicating the disease and the social disruption it caused were placed on the marginalized couple being married. The ritual also functioned as a form of scapegoating, transferring communal "filth" and impurity onto the

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[243] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 99.
[244] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 116.

marginalized individuals. This practice aligned with broader cultural beliefs typing disease outbreaks to perceived moral failings, particularly sexual immorality. Asa Briggs notes that communities often sought explanations for why some neighbourhoods were devastated by cholera while others were spared.[245] Meir writes that working-class neighbourhoods, with poorer sanitation, were typically more affected by cholera than wealthier areas.[246] This disparity fueled the belief that sexual immorality among the working class was the root cause of the epidemic.

Ultimately, the Black Wedding functioned as a form of cosmic reconciliation. The couple, once marginalized, became both vessels for communal sin and figures of communal hope. By marrying them, the community reduced the risk of perceived sexual immorality and, by extension, the threat of divine punishment. Supported by the community, the couple would have more opportunities to maintain Jewish law and uphold the teachings of the Rebbe. Nowhere is this more evident than in the inner story of wedding gifts given to the bride and groom. As Rebbe Hayim tells a story about this, he is also encouraging the community of Tsanz to generously support the couple married in the Black Wedding. This gift-giving symbolizes the community's investment in their future, hopes for the eradication of the epidemic, and continual solidarity between the Rebbe and the community. In "Wedding Presents," Reb Hayim's approval of the Black Wedding reinforced his authority, demonstrating his ability to balance tradition with communal well-being. Ironically, in accounts of Black Weddings, the local Rabbi or Rebbe seem to be either in full control of the ritual's performance or completely against it. Reb Hayim in this story shows a level of vulnerability in his own power by leaving. This could either because he

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[245] Asa Briggs, "Cholera and Society in the Nineteenth Century," *Past & Present* 19 no. 1, (1961) doi:10.1093/past/19.1.76.

[246] Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl,* 90.

was following halakhic directives (Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 116:5)[247] or because if he recommended the ritual be performed and the epidemic did not end, blame would potentially be put on him. But from the story, even if he potentially doubted his own power, his endorsement of the ritual kept the community united and hopeful, a gamble which ultimately solidified his leadership in a time of crisis.

The Wheel of Fate

The concept of fate as a wheel is prevalent within Hasidic tales. The wheel moves, on the one hand, arbitrarily; it turns at its discretion. On the other hand, in folk rituals there is a built-in mechanism for dealing with fate's turning. The turning of the wheel is a very normal occurrence. But through ritual action, one could perhaps nudge the wheel a little bit. The Black Wedding is double connected with the wheel of fate, as seen through the two couples. The wheel of fate is intended to reward the couple for the scapegoating ritual that the community performed.

The story of the servant couple explicitly mentions the wheel of fate: "after a few years, the wheel of fate turned for their employer (heaven protect us), and he had nothing left to pay them for their work." The workings of the wheel are apparent later in the story in the case of the tavernkeeper, a bystander to the wedding rather than an actual participant. His fate, in this version of the story, is unknown; however, in other accounts, the wheel of fate is made more explicit. In one version of the servant couple's story, set in an earlier time, "The Happy Pair and the Baal Shem Tov,"[248] the Polish nobleman asks what to give the Jewish couple at the end:

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[247] See Talmudic and halakhic sources compiled by Elli Fischer, "Fight or Flight? Halakhic Responses to Plague", https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/241172.10?lang=bi .

[248] "The Happy Pair and the Baal Shem Tov," 279-281.

> All the people shouted, "Let them have the mill and the tavern!" And so the stingy tavern keeper and his family had to leave their home and become beggars, while the former servants took over the tavern and the mill and became very rich.

Compare this to the "Wedding Presents" version:

> Then they [the Polish nobles] gave him [the bridegroom] deeds, signed and sealed, for each of these presents, and sent orders to the overseers of each of these places telling them that they had been given to that Jew, and that when he arrived there they were to hand over everything to him, as set out in the deeds.
>
> Now, when the matter reached the ears of the Jewish tavernkeeper, that he was compelled to turn over his tavern, he was greatly shocked, and travelled immediately to the holy rebbe Reb Elimelech. He wept before him bitterly and pleaded with him to pray for him so that he could remain in his place, for he had nowhere to turn.
>
> But Rebbe Reb Elimelech answered, "Didn't I tell you to give some present to that couple out of your own good will? You didn't listen; now, therefore, give him the tavern, and there is no more to say about it."

Through the Baal Shem Tov in one version, Rebbe Elimelech in another, and the Polish nobleman, the tavernkeeper shows that he is not a reliable partner for the Rebbes. Recall that the tavernkeeper was an important profession in terms of doing business between community members.[249] It is reasonable then to see that the Rebbes needed to count on the tavernkeeper to

[249] Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl,* 80.

hold their secrets, know the secrets of the community, and to economically their community. Due to the tavernkeeper's actions in these different accounts, he is not one to follow the Rebbes actions beyond a surface level understanding.

In "Wedding Presents" and "The Happy Pair and the Baal Shem Tov", the servant couple are initially working for a tavernkeeper. In the "Wedding Presents" version this is not the same tavernkeeper who refuses them a wedding present, but in "The Happy Pair and the Baal Shem Tov" the two are conflated. Reading the two stories together, there is a tavernkeeper who shows an inability to keep up with his duties and yet the young couple is able to keep him afloat. He shows both a lack of spiritual dependency as well as financial instability, as he was unable to pay the couple early on. The tavernkeeper's job was an important role for the Polish noblemen and for the community.[250] If the tavernkeeper struggled financially, he could not be counted on by the Polish nobleman to support their economic interests. This would necessitate the Polish nobleman needing a more dependable tavernkeeper. If so he was not dependable, the tavernkeeper then would lose his source of income and an important source of authority within the community.

The Polish noble family provide two readings. On the one hand, a simple reading is that the noblemen unwittingly followed Divine action, not knowing the Rebbes had promised them gifts. Yet, considering the historical reality, "Wedding Presents" indirectly seem to show that Reb Hayim has a connection with the Polish nobility. This in turn would make sense of why the couple would be able to gain possession of these different properties like the tavern, since the Hasidim who promised them did not actually have possession of them. Moshe Rosman wrote that already by the eighteenth century in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the rabbinate

[250] Glenn Dynner. *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 28.

had become a type of *arrenda* (lease from the nobility).[251] Even though the rabbi was dependent on the community, ultimately the rabbi needed authority from the Polish nobles to make his rulings legally binding. This issue allowed Rebbes and others to challenge these authorities and appear untainted.[252] Eventually, when Rebbes had assumed authority, they too needed to cultivate good relations with the Polish nobility. There is evidence of individuals going to a Rebbe and asking the Rebbe to pray for them that they would acquire an *arrenda* from the Polish noblemen. A Rebbe would more easily be able to grant such a wish if he had connections with the nobleman, on a human level.[253] "Wedding Presents" although not necessarily a factual historical story, is a story grounded in historical reality. The fact is the Polish elite, and the Rebbe were both keenly intertwined in changing a person's fate. The servant couple encounter two types of authority figures: the Rebbe, who, with his magical powers, blesses them with fortune, and the Polish nobleman, whose political power also blesses them with fortune.

The tavernkeeper's response in "The Happy Pair and the Baal Shem Tov," shows acceptance of fate's rotation. The couples in both stories are rewarded and raised from the position of marginalized. Rewards are an important feature of Hasidic tales. Through a ritual like the Black Wedding, the status of the marginalized will increase—though ironically, we have seen that in historical fact couples married through a Black Wedding might be marked as beggars for life.

Throughout this chapter different accounts of the Black Wedding have been examined. The mixture of historical accounts with Hasidic tales provides a more detailed understanding of how the Black Wedding was perceived. The Black Wedding arrived at the intersection of modern

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[251] Moshe Rosman, *The Lord's Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 198–204

[252] Dynner, *Men of Silk,* 16.

[253] Dynner, *Men of Silk,* 114.

health sciences and the mystical experiences many followers of Rebbes desired. The Black Wedding has always existed in a space of cultural discomfort. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of historical accounts and the more fictional accounts paint a richer understanding that the Black Wedding was not just a backwoods folk practice, but in fact, was connected to deeper beliefs related to community, the natural and the supernatural order of life.

Conclusion

The Black Wedding ritual reflects a vast array of fascinating innovations in religious behavior, serving both as a window into history and as a reflection of the communities that performed such rituals. From the earliest records, the Black Wedding was a practice steeped in controversy, showing awareness of outside observers. Despite this fear and trepidation, the Black Wedding continued to be performed. This demonstrates how, with the passage of time, certain practices can take deeper root in the cultural memory of communities, lending them an aura of ancient tradition. Nevertheless, there is still much to be explored about this living ritual.

The first chapter argued that the Black Wedding developed as a means of preserving the social roles and hierarchies of the Eastern European Jewish community. This included the social relationships with non-Jewish communities. The Black Wedding was a folk ritual meant for uniting the community in the hopes of staving off the cholera epidemic (and later epidemics). Despite its controversial nature and departures from normative halakha, religious and civil leaders, such as Hasidic Rebbes, used the practice of the Black Wedding to solidify their support among Jews and reinforce their capacity to speak for the Jewish community when it came to working with non-Jewish authorities.

The second chapter examined the Black Wedding within a non-Jewish context. The ritual arose in an environment that prized rites of passage and the completion of those rites. Central and Eastern Europe provided fertile ground for blending marriage and death, and the importance of managing the boundaries between life and death. In the nineteenth century, this environment was also characterized by the clash between emerging medical science and enduring folk beliefs. Many cultures Jewish and non-Jewish, struggled to confront these hegemonic scientific models. Attention to these overlapping similarities provides a richer understanding that the Black

Wedding was not solely a Jewish ritual but also reflected the surrounding non-Jewish cultural world.

The third chapter examined more or less historical accounts of Black Weddings as well as Hasidic stories. These sources offer differing perspectives on the Black Wedding's development and significance. Early accounts of the Black Wedding reveal a mixture of the perceived effectiveness of the ritual and the personal charisma of Rebbes involved in the Black Wedding. Over time, the Black Wedding gained broader acceptance across diverse Jewish communities. By 1918 the Black Wedding had become more a matter of collective memory than strictly historical tradition. Special attention was given to the Black Wedding in Winnipeg that year. Newspaper reports on this event are significant because of what is said but also what is left unsaid. For example, we can infer that the participation of two rival rabbis was an act of unifying the city's Jewish community. The theme of unity becomes more apparent in the Hasidic story "Wedding Presents." This Hasidic story provides a fuller picture of the Black Wedding's meaning, showing that it was not solely about halting an epidemic or providing for the couple but a multifaceted ritual of cosmic reconciliation, with political, religious, and mystical dimensions.

The Black Wedding sparks curiosity during times of epidemic, yet many questions remain about the ritual and about rituals in general. For instance, what were the specific influences within the community, and in what specific ways did external communities shape religious practices?

Another question for the future is how the Black Wedding will continue to reinvent itself over time. A common question in conversations and at conferences is: "When did this practice stop?" The last known Black Wedding occurred as recently as 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. While I have not yet deeply considered this most recent case, I wonder what

motivated the community to hold such a wedding. Were they influenced by Yiddish accounts like *Fishke the Lame*, or did they draw upon Hasidic stories of the Black Wedding? The Black Wedding is a striking example of an imagined tradition, and it will be fascinating to see how it continues to evolve in the future.

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