

# **Elements of Jewish Folklore in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Short Stories**

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato práce popisuje a analyzuje nejdůležitější a nejvýznamnější prvky židovského folklóru ve čtyřech vybraných povídkách Isaaca Bashevisa Singera. Zkoumané elementy jsou rozděleny na mytologické, biblické, a na zvyky a tradice. První část práce se zabývá zasazením židovského autora Isaaca Bashevisa Singera, do kontextu americké literatury. Následuje popsání nejvýznamnější elementů a jejich srovnání v souvislosti s vybranými povídkami. Práce dochází k závěru, že ačkoliv je Singer velmi ovlivněný Židovským folklórem, což se odráží v jeho tvorbě, některé prvky jsou jím pozměněné a liší se od folklóru.

Klíčová slova: Isaac Bashevis Singer, židovský folklór, povídka, mytologie, Bible, zvyky, tradice

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis describes and analyzes the most important and the most significant elements of Jewish folklore in four Isaac Bashevis Singer's short stories. Analyzed elements are divided into mythological, biblical, and elements of customs and traditions. First part of the bachelor thesis is focused on the author in context of Jewish American literature. In the next part, the most significant elements are described and analyzed in connection with analyzed short stories. Conclusion of this thesis says that Singer and his writings are much influenced by Jewish folklore, but some elements are modified by Singer.

Keywords: Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jewish folklore, short story, mythology, the Bible, customs, traditions

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## INTRODUCTION

Isaac Bashevis Singer's short stories are famous for their traditional Jewish settings, for their orthodox Jewish characters and also for other elements connected with Jewish folklore. Singer himself was a Jew, much influenced by Jewish lifestyle and culture, and he considered being a Jew as a part of his life and soul. His strong approach to traditions we can understand from his quotation "One should never lose his roots".<sup>1</sup>

The quotation clarifies why Singer, living and writing in the United States of America, wrote short stories based on orthodox Jewish beliefs and superstitions, and also why he wrote in Yiddish, which I consider brave, but risky. Using Yiddish, a dying language, in English speaking country, was definitely an uncertain step, but I think that for Singer it was more important to continue Jewishness than to become famous. In spite of everything, Singer became a master storyteller in America, and he also became one of the most important Jewish authors.

In my Bachelor thesis I am going to identify the most important elements of Jewish folklore in the following Singer's four short stories: "The Gentleman from Cracow", "Zeidlus the Pope", "The Last Demon" and "The Grandfather and Grandson". I chose these short stories because in each short story important or interesting Jewish elements are included, and some of them are even interconnected, so we can see and analyze their differences or similarities.

The main purpose of my work is to identify the most important elements of Jewish folklore, describe them, and analyze them in connection with the four chosen Singers short stories. I would also like to find out if Singer strictly followed the folklore, or if he added his own features. My Bachelor thesis is going to be divided into 4 main chapters where the first chapter will be about Singer's personal life that influenced him in his career. Another three chapters will include descriptions and analysis of elements. Jewish folklore is an extensive topic, so in my work I have decided to analyze only the most important mythological, biblical elements and elements of Jewish traditions and customs because they are part of the superstitions, legends or course of life, and they are also part of Judaism, which is the basis of Jewish culture. These three groups of elements should show and clarify all aspects of Jewish folklore.

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<sup>1</sup> Seth L. Wolitz, *The Hidden Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 168.

## 1 ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER IN THE CONTEXT OF JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

Isaac Bashevis Singer was one of the most important writers of the 20th century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1978 for his lifelong work. But he is considered rather to be a storyteller than a writer. That is because Singer did not write just an ordinary fiction. He used mainly the Jewish folklore topics and motives, even the characters are Jews of their ordinary life or, on the other hand, he used elements of Judaic mythology, for example creatures that appear there. What is important about his writing is its uniqueness, which includes and combines Singer's own life experiences, Judaism, Jewish traditions, mythology and customs or social relations. We cannot also forget to mention that although Singer lived and wrote in the 20th century, his short stories are set predominantly in the 19th century.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1 Singer's Work Influenced by His Personal Life in Poland

I.B. Singer was born to an orthodox Jewish family on 24th of July in 1904 in a small Polish town called Leoncin lying about 40 kilometres far from Warsaw. His original born name was Yitskhok Zynger, but he changed the name after the emigration to the USA. He also added his middle name Bashevis, which means son of Bathsheba – Bathsheba was the name of his mother. Singer's family was his first experience with the Jewish world. Isaac was born as a grandson of two rabbis and his father was also a rabbi.<sup>3</sup> When he was about four years old, the whole family moved to Warsaw; they lived in the Krochmalna Street and its neighborhood was full of people with questionable reputation, including prostitutes, thieves and other underground figures. Singer personally said that this life period was for him an important source of inspiration for his later literary work.<sup>4</sup>

The most influencing life experience was for Singer time spent in Bilgorai, which was a traditional Jewish village in Poland where thirteen years old Isaac and his mother moved in 1917. They spent there the last year of the First World War and they stayed in Bilgorai

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<sup>2</sup>See "About Isaac Bashevis Singer," American Masters, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/isaac-bashevis-singer/about-isaac-bashevis-singer/706/> (accessed December 27, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See Petri Liukkonen, "Isaac Bashevis Singer," Kirjasto, <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/ibsinger.htm> (accessed December 27, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See "Biography 1904-1935," Singer100, <http://singer100.ioa.org/life/1/> (accessed December 27, 2011).

several years after. It was because Singer's mother wanted to stay with the whole extended family during these hard times. But although Isaac was surrounded by many aunts, uncles and cousins he felt miserable and lonely. His mother did not have time to take care of him and his father did not live in Bilgorai because of his rabbi work. As a rabbi, Singer's father was responsible for whole Jewish community where he worked, so it was partly the moral obligation to stay with the commune and not with the family. But the main reason for Isaac being so lonely was the absence of his brother Israel Joshua, who was young Isaac's mentor and literary role model. Joshua was at that time in the Soviet Union. Isaac tried to fill his loneliness by studying anything he could about Jewish culture. He studied Zionism, he read Yiddish books, newspapers, journals and he even gave Hebrew lessons to support himself financially. Life in Bilgorai was for young Isaac difficult, but later he realized that despite all the hardship, the village impressed him deeply.<sup>5</sup> Even though Singer lived in Warsaw when he was four, he spent a lot of years in Jewish traditional village Bilgorai during his growing up and there he witnessed orthodox Jewish life with all its traditions and superstitions. He was also raised and educated by his rabbi father and he went through rabbinic seminary. All these aspects influenced Singer's future writing. Predominantly in his short stories, he used the experiences from Bilgorai and from his Jewish roots: mythology, traditions, superstitions or Jewish customs.

After WWI Singer's family moved to Dzikow Stary, because Isaac's father had obtained the position of rabbi in the village. Isaac left Bilgorai and started to attend rabbinical seminary, as he felt he needed a life change from the strict Jewish lifestyle in Bilgorai. But he soon found out that the profession is not suitable for him so he left school. Young Isaac was lost in his life and disappointed in himself. In his confusion he turned to his brother, who offered him that he could come live with him and his wife Genye, their child and her parents. At that time young Isaac, who had fallen for literature, started to wonder if he could become a writer. First step to this aim was his entering the Yiddish writer's club in Warsaw. He needed the club, because he realized that only through writing he was able to express all the feelings he had. In the club he finally found his home, he met

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<sup>5</sup> See Janet Hadda, *Issac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 55.

people who shared love for Yiddish, he made new friends and he probably found inspiration for some of his characters there.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 Emigration to the USA

Later in 1936, Isaac joined his brother Israel in New York and started working as a proofreader in a Yiddish newspaper called *Foverts*. During his residency in America, Isaac realized that Yiddish was a dying language, especially in America. Not only he was away from the culture, but also his native land and his nation was under the threat of the Second World War. According to his own words, Isaac felt lost once again and for some period of his life, he regretted having moved to the USA.<sup>7</sup> He could not handle separation from the Jewish culture and from his family. Isaac was depressed and anxious, and he felt trapped in very different country that he could not understand. Isaac and his brother Israel had problems but finally Israel tried to help Isaac to integrate. This was done by introducing him to other writers. Finally, Isaac got someone to talk to again about Zionism, Jewish and Russian writers and many other topics. Singer also realized necessity of learning English, because, living in the U.S, not knowing a word, was difficult for him. If he wanted to stay in the U.S, he needed to stop thinking about Poland and become a real American.<sup>8</sup>

I.B. Singer was, as a writer, finally discovered in 1952 by Irving Howe, who was doing research for the Yiddish stories anthology. He became a popular Yiddish writer, but unfortunately in the U.S.A, there were not a lot of people, who were able to read Yiddish. Isaac had no other choice, but to start to translate all his works from Yiddish into English. Translation was done by Singer himself, cooperating with few translators. Singer's work was translated into more than 20 languages. From the boy who grew up in the Polish orthodox village he became a famous master storyteller, living in America. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978 as the ninth American and the only Yiddish author.<sup>9</sup>

Emigration to U.S.A was for I.S. Singer complicated and demanding, because he was a person having troubles with adopting absolutely new culture together with its language. He

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<sup>6</sup> See Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 56-69.

<sup>7</sup> See "Biography 1936-1949," Singer100, <http://singer100.loa.org/life/2/> (accessed January 9, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> See Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 96-106.

<sup>9</sup> See "Biography 1950-1991," Singer100, <http://singer100.loa.org/life/2/> (accessed January 9, 2012).

also married Alma Haimann, a woman who was from assimilated Munich, so she knew nothing about Bilgorai, she never was in Warsaw and she did not know a word in Yiddish. But despite of these issues, they were married for more than 50 years, until Isaac's death on 24<sup>th</sup> of July in 1991. Alma helped him to create new home in a new land. Even though Isaac was disconnected from his roots in Poland, he did not want to go back, and so he finally found a way how to feel at home in America.<sup>10</sup> The proof of Singer's successful assimilation we can find in the following excerpt from one interview with him.

*“If you ask me from an emotional point of view, I don't feel myself a foreigner, because I love America and I love the American people... And since my own country, Poland, where I was born, almost does not exist as far as I am concerned – it's a different world there – the U.S is my real home now. So just as English has become to me a second original, America is to me my real country.”*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 93-107.

<sup>11</sup> “*Isaac Bashevis Singer: An Interview*,” interview by Cyrena Pondrom, in Isaac Bashevis Singer: *Conversations*, ed. Grace Farrel (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 51.

## 2 SINGER'S SHORT STORIES AND JEWISH FOLKLORE: MYTHOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

As it was already mentioned, I.B. Singer is considered more to be a storyteller than a writer. There are several reasons for it. In his short stories he used Jewish motives the plot is set in the 19th century, in a traditional Jewish town or a village where almost all Jewish characters, customs, traditions and the Jewish lifestyle are described. But in Singer's short stories it is easy to find the Jewish mythological elements, including a large number of mythological creatures. In the following subheads particular mythological elements are introduced and analyzed so readers can better understand Singer's short stories.

### 2.1 Demons

In the Jewish folklore demons are widely contained. According to Jewish superstitions a "middle world" exists, where only spirits are found and where angels and demons live. According to the Jewish folklore demons are able to make people, who are under demon's magic power, rich and famous.<sup>12</sup>

Demons are believed to be created by God, the Creator of all things. According to their origin, demons are supposed to be in hierarchy, creatures between angels and men. They possess wings like angels, but they can eat, drink and even die like humans. They are also believed to be unsubstantial and invisible to men, so it is difficult to recognize them because they do not even cast shadow. Although demons have no particular shape, they can transform themselves into men or animals. It is believed that a demon is distinguished from humans due to their feet of cock that they cannot transform into human feet. Favourite places for demons are unoccupied places, forests, desert or unclean places. Jewish demonology describes a quite large number of different demons, but in his fiction Singer uses only selected types. But we can say he follows the view of demons according to Jewish superstition, although he adds some new elements.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 25.

<sup>13</sup> See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 29-32.

### 2.1.1 Evil Eye and Ketev Meriri

First analyzed mythological element is Ketev Meriri, who is the main character in Singer's short story "The Gentleman from Cracow" and he is also mentioned in another story "The Last Demon".

According to different rabbinic sources, in the Jewish folklore "the Evil Eye" or "an evil eye" terms are known, which is closely connected with the Ketev Meriri demon. It is believed that the Evil Eye can cause harm to a human, and tool of death is supposed to be possessed by Angel of the Death or by Ketev Meriri. Ketev Meriri looks like he is made of peels, with much hair and mainly with many eyes, with one eye situated right in his heart. Superstition says who sees the eye will die. All demons have legs of cock and Ketev Meriri has above that a head of calf with a horn on the forehead. He is together with Lilith considered to be particularly dangerous and powerful. The best protected against demons and also against Ketev Meriri are rabbis. This protection, absolute immunity, is provided by Torah.<sup>14</sup>

Singer focused on Ketev Meriri in "The Gentleman from Cracow" a lot, and it shows us that he considered Jewish mythology important. He could create his own demon, but he chose to follow the mythology. Interesting excerpt is in the story, where Singer describes this demon. We can observe in it, how much he follows the superstition:

*"And then the gentleman from Cracow revealed his true identity. He was no longer the young man the villagers had welcomed, but a creature covered with scales, with an eye in his chest, and on his forehead a horn that rotated at great speed. His arms were covered with hair, thorns, and elflocks, and his tail was a mass of live serpents, for he was none other than Ketev Mriri, Chief of the Devils."*<sup>15</sup>

Singer's visualization is pretty much same as mythology notion, even though he adds his personal elements as for example a minor change of the name, or the serpent's tail. Ketev Mriri has great power and he is undoubtedly dangerous and able to cause harm to people; he destroys the whole town together with his female companion Lilith and other demons. Ketev Mriri also shows his ability to turn into a human being, and that makes him much

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<sup>14</sup> See Michael E. Stone and Shemuel Safrai, *The Literature of Sages: Second Part* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 534,

<sup>15</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 25.

more dangerous, because people cannot recognize the demon in him. Singer also refers to the protection against the Ketev Mriri:

*“Relentlessly, the rabbi urged the people to resist evil. Reciting the Torah and other holy books, as well as incantations and the several names of God, he succeeded in rousing some of them. Soon others responded. The rabbi had helped the first man from the mire, then that one assisted the next, and so on. Most of them had recovered by the time the morning star appeared.”*<sup>16</sup>

In the excerpt it is rabbi reciting the Torah, who saves the story town from the demon’s clutches. This is precisely according to mythology.

Another reference about Ketev Meriri appears in the story “Last Demon”. There, this demon is only mentioned, but again, we can focus in the excerpt on Singers connection between his writing and the Jewish mythology.

“The moment the rabbi of Tishevit speaks these words, I know everything is lost. We can disguise all parts of our body but the feet. From the smallest imp right up to Ketev Mriri we all have the claws of geese.”<sup>17</sup>

According to the mythology all demons are able to change into men or animal, but they all have legs of cock. Again we can say that Singer follows mythology and superstition, but he adds of changes some specific elements. In this case he changed legs of cock into the claws of geese. Modification of the Jewish folklore is quite common in Singer’s short stories. He modified also the name of the Ketev Meriri to Ketev Mriri. That change can refer to other modifications of the demon that Singer made. The change of the name shows to the reader at very beginning, that it will not be the same folkloric demon.

### 2.1.2 Lilith

Next analyzed element is character of Lilith, which appears also in the story “The Gentleman from Cracow” and which is closely connected to Ketev Meriri. According to Jewish mythology, Lilith was originally created by God from dust as the first wife for Adam, so she is sometimes called The First Eve. But since they first met they have fought, until Lilith escaped from him. According to her own words, she was created to strangle newborn children – boys before the eighth day, and girls before the twentieth day of their

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<sup>16</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 185.



life. Three angels, sent by God Senoy, Sansenoy and Semangelof, went to convince Lilith to come back, but even though she did not come back, she made a deal with angels. If newborn baby have an amulet hung above the bed with three angels' names on it, Lilith will not strangle it.<sup>18</sup>

Lilith is dangerous mainly for men, who are alone at home during the night, because her aim is to seduce the man and give birth to mutant demons – half man, half demon. She is usually described as a creature with long black hair, as the long hair symbolizes she is unmarried. There are some sources claiming that Lilith has red hair instead of black, and it is even sometimes said that she has wings.<sup>19</sup>

In the story, Lilith is actually a female character named Hodle, who has several common features with Lilith. First of all she acquired a reputation of a thief at the age of six and gained lascivious reputation at the age of twelve. She was described by Singer as a tall redhead, which is the same look as Lilith has, and Hodle also likes seducing men as we can read in the following extract from the story. (Ketev Mriri is asking Hodle questions.)

*“Have you sinned only with Jews or with Gentiles as well?”*

*‘With both.’*

*‘Was it for bread?’*

*‘No. For the sheer pleasure.’*

*‘How old were you when you started?’*

*‘Not quite ten.’*

*‘Are you sorry for what have you done?’*

*‘No.’’<sup>20</sup>*

Singer modifies mythology and describes to readers the change of Hodle (Lilith) into a creature with worms and caterpillars in her hair, standing naked in front of her bridegroom Ketev Mriri. We can say that worms and caterpillars deepen her wickedness and sins, and overall emphasize the whole character of Lilith. In the story there is also a mention of dead babies left at home. The difference from the mythology is that babies were not strangled

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<sup>18</sup> See Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 216-217.

<sup>19</sup> See Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 218.

<sup>20</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 24.

but they died in a fire that destroyed the whole town. In the story is not the information about who killed the babies. But according to superstition it is Hodle who should be responsible for their death. If the reader knows mythological Lilith, he will definitely suppose that Hodle did this. That Hodle was really Lilith we can read in the story almost at the end in the particular sentence:

“Then it was understood that Hodle was in truth Lilith, and that the host of the netherworld had come to Frampol because of her.”<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1.3 Werewolves, Imps and Witches

Werewolves, imps and witches are important mythological creatures, not only in Jewish mythology, but also in many others. In contrast with Lilith or Ketev Merir, they are more known among the people, but Jewish conception of these creatures is slightly different. Werewolves are foreign supernatural beings, because they were imported into the Jewish mythology in the eleventh and twelfth centuries from the French and German mythology. Werewolf is supposed to be a wizard or a demon, who lives on the Earth in the form of a man, but who is able to transform himself into a wolf and attack and devour people. In the Jewish mythology werewolves are considered as another form of vampire because of their lust for blood.<sup>22</sup>

Imps were originally named by the Jewish word *Mazzikims*, but designation imps became more frequent. Imps are demons, or according to some sources, evil spirits, who cause ill fortune and poor health.<sup>23</sup>

Witches appear in the most cultures all around the world and they usually are considered evil practitioners of magic. Therefore it is no surprise we can find witches even in the Jewish folklore. Interesting is that Jewish attitude towards witches differs in connection to the era and geography. Sometimes they were considered a serious problem and sometimes were regarded as a minor trouble. Origins of witchcraft are attributed to fallen angels who taught their mortal wives. This is the reason why Jewish people usually

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<sup>21</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 28.

<sup>22</sup> See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 38-39.

<sup>23</sup> See “Mazzikim: Imps in Judaism,” *Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism*, <http://ejmmm2007.blogspot.com/2007/08/mazzikim-imps-in-judaism.html> (accessed January 17, 2012).

associated woman with a witch. Witches usually kill unsuspecting people, cursing their rivals or intervene with healthy births and they are motivated mainly by envy and jealousy or they use their power for their own profits.<sup>24</sup>

According to the Jewish folklore, werewolves, imps and witches are evil creatures causing only bad, unpleasant and horrible things and I.B. Singer uses these traditional fictional characters in the same way. We can find them again in the short story “The Gentleman from Cracow”, when Ketev Meriri shows his true face and the whole village of Frampol is being destroyed by fire, and werewolves, imps, hobgoblins and witches are coming to help with destruction. “Witches, werewolves, imps, demons, and hobgoblins plummeted from the sky, some on brooms, others on hoops, still others on spiders.”<sup>25</sup> Writer does not pay attention to description of them, because it is supposed that everyone knows them and even in context it is clear that they are evil creatures. Main aspect suggesting evil is mention of spiders, because spiders are almost always associated with scary or wicked things.

Character of imp appears in another Singers short story “The Last Demon”. Imps are demons, so they have ability to transform themselves into an animal. This is the case of the imp from “The Last Demon” who was found turned into a spider, but according to his own word he used to be also a worm, a flea or a frog. The imp in this short story is a forgotten demon living alone in the village, so we can suppose that turning into small, almost invisible animals is for forgotten demon the best choice, because people will not notice him even if he stays in one place for two hundred years like this particular demon. He was also found in one godforsaken village of Tishevitz in an empty place, it is where imps and demons stay according to superstitions.

Another demonic character appearing in the short story “The Last Demon” is the last demon itself. He calls himself last, because at the end of the story he is the last demon left on the Earth. He is sent by the demon Asmodeus to persuade one of the last pure people – young rabbi – to sin. It is worth mentioning that the last demon considers itself a Jew, not gentile, (gentile is an English term for a non-Jewish person). This is the sign that Singer is

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<sup>24</sup> See Geoffrey Dennis, “Witches,” My Jewish Learning, [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Magic\\_and\\_the\\_Supernatural/Practices\\_and\\_Beliefs/Supernatural\\_Beings/Witches.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Magic_and_the_Supernatural/Practices_and_Beliefs/Supernatural_Beings/Witches.shtml) (accessed January 18, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 25

truly using the Jewish mythology and that he separated it from other mythologies or folklores, because he even distinguished Jewish and Gentile demons.

“I don’t have to tell you that I am a Jew. What else, a Gentile? I’ve heard that there are Gentile demons, but I don’t know any, nor do I wish to know them.”<sup>26</sup> The last demon is not described to readers, but there is an element proving he is a demon. When the demon is trying to convince young rabbi to sin, he is telling him he is one of the prophets, so rabbi is requesting to see prophet’s feet. This shows that rabbi was knowledgeable as it was said in the short story, because this is the only sign how to recognize demons from the human beings. It is because demons can change their shape and transform into a man or animal, but according to the Jewish folklore they have feet of cock. There is certain deviation, because Singer gave the Last demon feet of geese.

*“Forgive me, my Lord, but I require another sign.”*

*‘What do you want me to do? Stop the sun?’*

*‘Just show me your feet.’*

*‘The moment the rabbi of Thishevit, speaks these words, I know everything is lost. We can disguise all the parts of our body but the feet. From the smallest imp right up to Ketev Meriri we all have the claws of geese...’*<sup>27</sup>

#### **2.1.4 Asmodeus, and Satan – Archangel Samael**

Asmodeus was originally a Persian evil spirit who aroused anger and a desire for revenge in people. In the Jewish folklore Asmodeus was considered a demon that caused marital problems, mainly because he encouraged people to commit adultery. This is one of the reasons why he is considered a demon of lust. According to the Jewish legends, Asmodeus was a son of a mortal woman, Naamah, and the fallen Angel.<sup>28</sup> But it is sometimes believed he could be the son of Adam’s first wife Lilith and the very archangel Samael. As it was once said, Asmodeus is more a Persian demon, but during the time, he was incorporated in the Jewish folklore and his conception has changed in int. We can find him under several different names like Saturn, Marcolf or Morolf or he is sometimes

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<sup>26</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 179.

<sup>27</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 185.

<sup>28</sup> See Richard Webster, *Encyclopedia of Angels* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2009), 24.

nicknamed as one of the vessels of Wrath. The Jewish folklore also believes that Asmodeus was the creator of dancing, music or drama.<sup>29</sup>

In the Jewish mythology we can find several legends about the fall of Satan, including a legend about Satan originally being Prince of Darkness who turned against God, because God wanted to create world from light, not from darkness. But it is first believed that Satan used to be Archangel Samael who turned away from God because he refused to honor Adam who was created from dust, and on the other hand, Samael was created from the God's glory. Almost all angels together with Archangel Michael honored Adam according to God's demand, but Samael did not. He refused, saying he is more perfect and Adam should honor him instead, or he will proclaim himself the Highest. And Samael's angels agreed. So Samael was expelled by Michael from Heaven to the Earth where he continues his rebellion against the good and God.<sup>30</sup>

Asmodeus and Satan are not usually main characters in Singer's short stories. They are usually subsidiary characters, mentioned several times as originators of other demonic powers. Character of Asmodeus appears several times in the story "The Last Demon". He commands the main character, the Last demon, to persuade a really righteous young rabbi to sin. We can see the difference in Singer's usage of the character of Asmodeus in comparison with the Jewish lore conception. In the story Asmodeus does not cause marital problems or does not prompt adultery, he demands any sin. And we can also say that Asmodeus is mixed up with Satan. It is because Satan is, according to Jewish mythology, supposed to be the ruler of the demons, because he proclaimed himself the highest. And from the story "The Last Demon" Asmodeus results to be the ruler, because of the context and because he commands other demons. The following extracts prove it. They are the monologues of the character of the Last demon, complying about the order of Asmodeus to go to Tishevitz, where is no other demon.

"Don't ask me how I managed to get to this smallest letter in the smallest of all prayer books. But when Asmodeus bids you go, you go."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Heather Changeri, "Asmodeus," whiterosegarden, [http://www.whiterosesgarden.com/Nature\\_of\\_Evil/Demons/List\\_of\\_Demons/A\\_contents/asmodeus.htm](http://www.whiterosesgarden.com/Nature_of_Evil/Demons/List_of_Demons/A_contents/asmodeus.htm) (accessed February 1, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> See Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths* (Harpswell: Anchor, 1989), 82-83.

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 179.

“To make long story short, I remain stuck in Tishevitz. No more Lublin, no more Odessa. In one second all my stratagems turn to ashes. An order comes from Asmodeus himself. Stay in Tishevitz and fry. Don’t go further than a man is allowed to walk on Sabbath.”<sup>32</sup>

Satan appears in the story “Zeidlus the Pope”, where he follows his lore features. He comes for the main character Zeidel, to take him to Gehenna (Jewish hell), after he persuaded him to convert to Christianity. Zeidel calls him Angel of the Death, which can be aligned with Prince of Darkness, and Satan confirms that it really is him. There is also a mention of hell, which is almost always connected with Satan.

*“ ‘Is it you, Satan, Angel of Death?’ Zeidel exclaimed joyously.*

*‘Yes, Zeidel,’ I replied, ‘I have come for you. And it won’t help you to repent or confess, so don’t try.’*

*‘Where are you taking me?’ he asked.*

*‘Straight to Gehenna.’ ”<sup>33</sup>*

Character from “The Gentleman from Cracow”, Ketev Mriri, can also be regarded in some aspects as Satan. Although description of Ketev Meriri in the story almost precisely follows folklore and mythology, there is one sentence that can suggest mixing of these two characters. “His arms were covered with hair, thorns, and elflocks, and his tail was a mass of live serpents, for he was none other than Ketev Mriri, Chief of the Devils.”<sup>34</sup> Chief of the devils is supposed to be Satan, not Ketev Mriri. Singer added Satan’s features to Ketev Meriri perhaps to make him seen more evil.

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<sup>32</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 186.

<sup>33</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 178.

<sup>34</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 25.

### 3 SINGER'S SHORT STORIES AND JEWISH FOLKLORE: BIBLICAL ELEMENTS

The following chapter is focused on the biblical elements in the Singer's short stories. It is because the Bible, biblical characters, stories and themes are a large part of the Singer's short stories. Judaism is based mainly on the Bible, specifically on the Torah which Christians call The Old Testament, and Judaism and the Bible are as important as culture or mythology for the Jewish folklore. And they are also strongly connected, so we can find for example biblical characters in mythology and vice versa.

#### 3.1 The Hebrew Bible (Tanak)

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts: The Torah (Teaching), Neviim (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings). The acronyms of these three words Tanak or Tanakh are another name for the Jewish Bible. In the Hebrew Bible or the Jewish Bible (Jewish terms for the Bible), the five books of Moses are called Bereshit, Sh'mot, Vayikra, Bemidbar and Devarim.<sup>35</sup> It is necessary to distinguish the Christian Bible from the Hebrew Bible even though the New Testament is built on the Torah (the Old Testament).

The Hebrew Bible, including the Torah, is basically a basis of Judaism and is often mentioned in Singer's short stories. It is the source of biblical elements used in his stories. For readers of I.B.S it is important to have at least basic knowledge of the Torah and its stories to understand all the allusions. Following subhead and subheadings explain and analyze the basic and the most common biblical elements of the Singer's short stories.

The word Torah has several different meanings in Hebrew. In translation it can mean "learning", or it can be even understood as Jewish learning in general. But mostly it is designation for the first five books of the Bible known as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.<sup>36</sup>

The Torah and the Bible are often mentioned in the Singer's short stories, because they are basis of Judaism and every Jew is supposed to know them. When these terms occur in the text and in the story, they illustrate the Jewish surroundings. It will not so often occur in non-Jewish stories. Following excerpts from the Singer's short stories serves as the

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<sup>35</sup> See David J. Zucker, *The Torah: An Introduction For Christians and Jews* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 8.

examples. First citation is from the short story “The Gentleman from Cracow”, where the inhabitants are possessed by the Ketev Mriri and a rabbi comes to save them.

“Relentlessly, the rabbi urged the people to resist evil. Reciting the Torah and other holy books, as well as incantations and the several names of God, he succeeded in rousing some of them.”<sup>37</sup> We can see in the excerpt an importance and the power of the Torah, because it has an ability to redeem people from the devil’s claws.

Second example is from the short story “Zeidlus the Pope”. It is Satan speaking with the main character Zeidel Cohen, trying to persuade him to sin.

“ ‘I’m telling you because it’s not right that a great man such as you, a master of the Torah, an encyclopedia of knowledge, should be buried in a godforsaken village such as this where no one pays the slightest attention to you...’ ”<sup>38</sup> The importance of the Torah can be seen in the excerpt, and it is much more interesting because it is the Satan who recognizes the greatness of the Torah. According his words the Torah is an encyclopedia of knowledge. This opinion corresponds with the meaning of the word the Torah – learning or even Jewish universal learning. But we also need to take into consideration that it is Satan who says these words and there is the possibility he does not mean it.

### 3.1.1 God

God is the Creator of all things, of the earth, heaven and all the creatures. He is the essential part of Jewish religion. This is the reason, why to understand at least a bit of Jewish principles of understanding of God is so important for the readers. And it is important to take into consideration that Jewish understanding of God differs from the Christian point of view. God in Christianity is connected with the Trinity concept. It means that God is only one, but he exists in three different substances – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand main Jewish principle is Unity of God. It means that just one Creator exists and simultaneously it excludes possibility of existence any other God. Another attribute of God is his incorporeity. Any specific definition of God does not exist, because human is not able to imagine and understand the conception of God. He has no

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<sup>36</sup> See David J. Zucker, *The Torah: An Introduction For Christians and Jews* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>37</sup> See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 26

<sup>38</sup> See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 172



shape, weight or height and he has no body. It is because God is according to Judaism unlimited, even in the time and space. Existence of God is proved by our thoughts, words and deeds, because God is the power causing everything. It is said that God is a source of all the causes.<sup>39</sup>

In Singer's short stories God is mentioned continually. He is usually not the main character, or character at all, but He is important, because He is crucial for the Jewish folklore, which is significant for Singer's writing. In his stories God is usually mentioned in connection with Bible, faith, customs and He sometimes happens to be a cause of the twists in the storylines. This proves that Singer is following Jewish conception of God – that He causes everything. Interesting is that Singer, who himself is a Jew, uses a motif of weakening of the faith. Usually it is the main character that begins to doubt the faith, or the existence of God. The reasons differ, it can be a demon, persuading character to stop to believe in God, or it can be a decision of the character itself, despite of some life-changing situations. But all the questionings of the faith in the stories have one thing in common: characters in the end always find a proof of God's existence even if it is not direct evidence. An example can be a character of Zeidel Cohen from the story "Zeidlus the Pope", who decides to convert to Christianity, because Satan himself persuades him to digress from Jewish God. In the following extract from the story Zeidel is talking to Satan, who comes to take Zeidel to Hell, after Zeidel lost his faith, first in Jewish God and later on also in Christian God.<sup>40</sup>

*"'Zeidel,' I said, 'prepare yourself. The last hour has come.'*

*'Is it you Satan, Angel of Death?' Zeidel exclaimed joyously.*

*'Yes Zeidel,' I replied, 'I have come for you. And it won't help you to repent or confess, so don't try.'*

*'Where are you taking me?' he asked.*

*'Straight to Gehenna.'*

*'If there is a Gehenna, there is also a God,' Zeidel said, his lips trembling.*

*'This proves nothing,' I retorted.*

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<sup>39</sup>See Michael Friedlander, *Text-Book of the Jewish Religion* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1928), 37-40.

<sup>40</sup>See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 170-178.

*'Yes it does,' he said. 'If Hell exists, everything exists. If you are real, He is real. Now take me to where I belong. I am ready.'*<sup>41</sup>

Zeidel's proof of God's existence, is existence of Hell, because God is the only Creator of everything, it means also the creator of Satan, who used to be an archangel Samael, created from the God's Glory.

### 3.1.2 Gehenna and Paradise

Gehenna is a place, closely connected with Tanak and with Jewish folklore and belongs to basic Jewish beliefs. There are a lot of legends about creation and conception of Gehenna which differ, but the intention is the same. To simplify definition of Gehenna, we can say it is the same as Christian Purgatory where Christians are purified from venial sins and then they are taken to Heaven. Also in Jewish Gehenna punishment is not eternal, but it lasts only one year. The legend of Gehenna is based upon the Valley of Gehinnom in Jerusalem which was considered to be an evil place, because pagans sacrificed children there.<sup>42</sup>

Conception of Gehenna is not the same according to different sources. Some say that Gehenna is a place full of fires, and some says that in Gehenna periods of fires and freeze change. Wicked people are taken to Gehenna by Prince of Gehenna, but he must wait until God gives him order to do that. It is not directly said who the Prince of Gehenna or the Prince of Darkness is, but there are few characters aspiring. It can be Ashmedai, who is supposed to be the king of the demons kingdom, or the angel Arsiel who distracts righteous from praying for the souls of wicked. But the best known who is identified with Prince of Gehenna is Satan. Gehenna is infinite like Garden of Eden but there are disagreements about where it lies. It can lie above the heaven or under the earth, and some opinions say that Gehenna and Paradise exist side by side.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to understand what Gehenna is, because this term appears in Singer's short stories and it is not explained there although it is not a common term. One reason can be that Singer was writing in the first place for Jewish readers, which is proved by his usage of Yiddish instead of English, and Jewish readers are supposed to know what

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<sup>41</sup> See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 178.

<sup>42</sup> See Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 233.

<sup>43</sup> See Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 232-233.

Gehenna is, because it is an essential part of their lore. The second reason can be that he did not think it is crucial for readers to understand what Gehenna actually is, because it sometimes results from the context. For example, in the extract from the previous subhead, from the story “Zeidlus the Pope”, it is obvious that Gehenna is Jewish hell or Purgatory, because Satan appears there wanting to take dying Zeidel to the Gehenna. And it is common knowledge that Satan is usually associated with hell. The same happens in the different story “Grandfather and Grandson”:

“The soul is sent to be cleansed in Gehenna for a short time and after that it goes to Paradise and learns the secrets of the Torah.”<sup>44</sup>

In this sentence three biblical elements appear at once: Gehenna, Paradise and Torah. Paradise in Judaism is associated with the Garden of Eden, and it is, after Gehenna, another eventuality where soul can go, right after death. A Jewish word for the Garden of Eden is Gan Eden and it has two meanings, which merge into one. The first meaning is the place, where Adam and Eve lived, and where they sinned by eating forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of evil and good. And the second meaning is actually paradise, the place where souls of the holy and the righteous dwell. Jewish lore believes that the Garden of Eden was created by God, because again – He was the only Creator and it is supposed have been created before the Creation of the world. Only the souls of the righteous can find the Garden of Eden, because it is well hidden and guarded from all ways.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.1.3 Moses and Sinai

This subhead is focused on Moses and receiving the Torah from God. Moses is one of the most important biblical characters, after God, and he is mentioned in two of Singer’s short stories which are analyzed in this bachelor thesis.

Moses is so important for Judaism, because he led Jews out of slavery, he was guiding the freed slaves for 40 years, he prepared them to enter the Promised land (in Jewish terminology known as Canaan) and what is the most important, he received the Torah and Ten Commandments from God. Moses was born during the slavery period in Egypt, in the time when Pharaoh decided that all new-born male Hebrews had to be drowned. Moses

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<sup>44</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 406.

<sup>45</sup> See Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 401-402.

was saved by his mother, who sent him in a basket on the Nile. Moses was found by Pharaoh's daughter who adopted him and raised him as an Egyptian prince.<sup>46</sup>

We will not focus on his life, because it will not be relevant for our purposes. We need to focus more on Moses receiving the Torah. There are lots of different opinions about the details, what actually happened on the Mount of Sinai, but all these different opinions agree that Moses received the Torah and Ten Commandments from God. It is supposed to have happened more than three thousand years ago, so it is obvious that disagreements occur. It is important to realize that, although Moses gave the Torah to Israelis, he is not its creator. Creator of the Torah is God, the Creator of all things, who chose Moses as his messenger. We can be confused by the fact that the Torah is sometimes called 5 books of Moses, which does not mean that he is the creator, but that he wrote it according the God's words and he gave it to his people.<sup>47</sup>

Moses receiving the Torah appears in two of the analyzed short stories. As for readers, it is not necessary to know the whole story, to understand the plot, but without the basic knowledge of the Jewish folklore we will never understand everything.

The first extract is from the short story "Zeidlus the Pope", where Satan and Zeidel are talking about God.

" 'He doesn't care whether men pray to Him in a synagogue or a church, fast from Sabbath to Sabbath or bloat themselves with pork. He is too exalted to notice these puny creatures who delude themselves thinking that they are the crown of Creation.' 'Does that mean God did not give the Torah to Moses at Sinai?' Zeidel asked."<sup>48</sup> Satan tries to persuade Zeidel to convert to Christianity, and Zeidel's first question, when he starts to doubt, is about Torah given at Sinai. That refers to great importance of this story. And it is the Torah that is basis of Judaism and if it was not given to Moses by God, it would lose its greatness.

The second extract comes from the short story "Grandfather and Grandson". Grandson Fulie meets his grandfather Reb Mordecai Meir, who is an orthodox Jew. On the other hand, Fulie has some progressive ideas, for example he studies Economics, or thinks that

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<sup>46</sup> See Joseph Telushkin, "Moses," Jewish virtual library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/moses.html> (accessed February 16, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> See Jeremy Rosen, "Chapter 4 - Was the Torah Given to Moses on Sinai?" Jeremy Rosen Online, <http://www.jeremyrosen.com/node/21> (accessed February 16, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 173.

Heavens is nothing but air. This is unacceptable for orthodox Jew, because sciences usually exclude the existence of God, and they also never question information written in the Bible. The following quote describes Fulie's opinions on Judaism.

“He denied the exodus from Egypt, that the Red Sea was split, that the Jews received the Torah on Mount Sinai. It was all legend. Each of Fulie's words pained Reb Mordecai Meir's insides, as if he had swallowed the molten lead which in ancient times was given to those who were condemned to be burned.”<sup>49</sup>

Grandfather is so disappointed in his grandson, who denies all the biblical beliefs which are essential for Jews, that he compares it with torture. Again it can show to readers how much it is important for Jewish society to believe, otherwise it can be understood as a betrayal of the own family and nation.

### **3.1.4 King David**

King David is another biblical character mentioning in Singer's stories. King David is one of the most important Jewish characters known from the Bible. He is known for his different skills, he was a warrior and he is also considered to be a writer of psalms. Also it is believed he wrote, or at least edited the Book of Psalms. As a king he ruled for forty years, approximately in the years 1010 and 970 B.C. For example, the unification of the people of Israel is ascribed to him. David was originally a shepherd in Bethlehem, but once the Prophet Samuel came to him and gave him the knowledge of the current King Saul. After some time, he began to work at the Royal Court as a musician and met King Saul and also his son Jonathan. David's first heroic act was the defeat of a nine-foot giant, Goliath of Gath, just with a stick and few stones. David became a commander of king's troops and was successful in several battles, which was the reason why King Saul became jealous and commanded Jonathan to kill David. But Jonathan and David were friends, so he helped him to escape. When he confronted Saul after some time, Saul admitted that David is going to be the king one day, but he has to promise not to destroy Saul's name and his descendants. But still he continued to persecute David. David became the king after Saul and Jonathan were killed. During his reign he defeated a lot of nations, he united Israel, enforced justice in his empire and established civil and military administrations in Jerusalem. He had many wives and many children, but the most important was his wife

Bathsheba, because together they had son called Solomon, who became the king after David's death.<sup>50</sup>

The Following extract is from the story "Zeidlus the Pope. "Zeidel Cohen was such a man. In the first place, he had the protection of noble ancestors: he was a descendant of Rashi, whose genealogy reached back to King David. In the second place, he was the greatest scholar in the whole province in Lublin."<sup>51</sup>

At the beginning of the story, Zeidel is truly righteous Jew, who unfortunately succumbs to Satan later on. Satan uses the only human weakness that Zeidel has and it is his haughtiness. Satan convinces Zeidel to convert to Christianity, because Jews do not deserve him, because Jews have never been able to honor their leaders, because Jews hate greatness. On the other hand, Christians admire any greatness. Zeidel turns away from his faith and the faith of his ancestors, just because he wants to be honored. From the previous extract we can deduce that Zeidel was a great man, who was well educated, and had all the ancestral roots that a Jew can have. King David was one of his ancestors and he was a great Jewish leader, who did many brave and important acts, so it is obvious, that Zeidel wanted be famous too. We can assume Zeidel had a feeling inside; he deserves to be better, like David, who became the king, although he was originally only a shepherd. So Zeidel, the righteous Jew, chooses to convert and become the Pope, Zeidlus the First. In this fact we can find another connection between the character from the story Zeidlus and David because becoming the Pope can be for Zeidel almost the same thing as becoming king, as both these positions are powerful and honorable. But Zeidel did not reach his aim, in contrast to David.

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<sup>49</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 409.

<sup>50</sup> See Shira Schoenberg, "David," Jewish virtual library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/David.html>(accessed February 17, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 170.

## **4 SINGER'S SHORT STORIES AND JEWISH FOLKLORE: ELEMENTS OF CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS**

This last chapter is going to describe and analyze elements of Jewish customs and traditions. Customs and traditions are important for Jews, as they are part of their everyday life, more than the Bible or Myths are. Jewish customs and traditions include holy days, course of life, Jewish writings and many others. Isaac Bashevis Singer uses these elements often. Reasons may differ, he describes in his short stories Jewish surroundings and for this, it is essential to use them, because they are basic part of Jewish lives or, on the other hand, he can be trying to bring Judaism and Jewish culture nearer to non-Jewish readers.

### **4.1 Festivals**

Before we focus on particular Jewish festivals, it is necessary to take into consideration that Jews have different calendar. Jewish calendar is not only lunar, but it is lunar-solar. It means that months are counted according to the lunar cycle and years are, on the other hand, counted according to the solar cycle. The new month begins right with the beginning of the new moon. Another variation is that years in the Jewish calendar have been counted since the Creation of the world. First counted is Nissan (falls on March to April) which is the first spring month and the following months are Iyar (from April to May), Sivan (from May to June), Tammuz (from June to July), Av (from July to August), Elul (from August to September), Tishri (from September to October), Heshvan (from October to November), Kislev (from November to December), Tevet (from December to January), Shevat (from January to February) and Adar (from February to March). And once in two or three years the thirteen month is added (called Vaadar or Adar Sheni). The first month of the year is Tishri, because it is supposed to be the month when the world has been created, and the first day of the calendar is Sunday and the seventh one is Saturday, known more like Sabbath.<sup>52</sup>

In the following subheads, various Jewish festivals are described, because it is substantive to know how difficult and time consuming it is to celebrate all Festivals, like each orthodox Jew should do. And mainly non-Jewish people are not actually informed about lots of following festivals and their rituals.

#### 4.1.1 Pilgrim Festivals – Passover, Shevuoth and Sukkoth

This feast is celebrated in commemorating the exodus from Egyptian slavery, which is one of the greatest events in Jewish history. Passover lasts eight days from the 15th of Nissan to the 22nd of Nissan. It is important to know that during the first and the last two days of Pesach it is prohibited to work. Pesach got its name after Hebrew word pasach which has (in English translation) meaning “to pass”. It comes from the biblical story when during the last plague in Egypt the Lord passed over Jewish people’s houses and spared their firstborn. Pesach or Passover starts with the evening service in synagogue, but more important is a service that takes place at Jewish homes. They have to clean all dishes used during the year perfectly, just to make sure that everything is kosher. During the home services fathers read narrations about the exodus from Egypt, with the intention to attract the attention of children. The services during Pesach are much more difficult, particularly what to serve and how to serve it, but for the needs of this bachelor thesis it is not necessary to know all the details.<sup>53</sup>

Another Jewish festival is called Shevuoth, or sometimes known as the Feast of Weeks even though it is celebrated on the 6th and 7th of Sivan. We can find similarity with Pesach, and that is disallowance of work, on both days of the feast. Shevuoth has two main elements – agricultural and historical. Agricultural aspect of the feast lies in the time when it is held, and it is usually a second half of May, when wheat is ripe in Israel and people thank God for his generosity. Nowadays, Shevuoth is celebrated mainly in the synagogues and Jewish homes, which are full of flowers and spring of trees. Historical aspect is another part of Shevuoth, the feast celebrates also the day when God gave Ten Commandments to Moses. Important Jewish duty during the Shevuoth is to read parts from Bible and other Jewish writings.<sup>54</sup>

Next, quite similar feast is Sukkoth, which is celebrated between the 15th and 23rd of Tishri and again it is the feast when during the first and two last days of celebration it is forbidden to work. It is a harvest celebration, when people show their gratitude to God for

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<sup>52</sup>See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 51-54.

<sup>53</sup> See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 58-59.

<sup>54</sup> See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 60.



their autumn crop of gardens and vineyards, and it is also the reminder of the key events of the formation of the spiritual life of the nation of Israel.<sup>55</sup>

In Shevuoth and Sukkoth there are few things that these two festivals have in common. Both are the feast to celebrate generosity of God and also they are celebrated with the intention to commemorate important Jewish historical events. Also prescribed days without work are interesting, because it is not really applicable in modern course of life, although it used to be possible in the ancient times or in orthodox villages in the past.

#### **4.1.2 Rosh ha-shanah and Yom Kippur**

Rosh ha-shanah and Yom Kippur are feasts together with Pilgrims festivals, belonging to the festivals mentioned in the Torah. Rosh ha-shanah, which is a Jewish alternative to New Year celebrating according to Gregorian calendar, falls on the last three weeks in September (Tishrei in Jewish calendar), but the exact date differs. The earliest date can be on 6th of September and latest on 4th of October. Rosh ha-shanah lasts for two days and again it includes the prohibition of work. One tradition connected with the Jewish New Year is reading the story of the Binding of Isaac, because it is believed that this event took place right on the New Year. The story tells the about event when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. A symbol of Rosh ha-shanah is white colour symbolizing repentance and humility, so for example men wear white skullcaps. Another custom is preparing of sweet meal at home, because it is believed that sweetness of the food will bring sweet and happy year.<sup>56</sup>

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement and it is the most important Jewish festival of the whole year. Yom Kippur is the culmination of a ten days' Penitence period, which is the period between Rosh ha-shanah and Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the feast of prayers and the rest, and also the feast of total fasting, which should remind to Jews that sins are caused mainly by inability to control human body and its instincts. The evening service

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<sup>55</sup> See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 61-63.

<sup>56</sup> See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 54-55.

starts with praying and then they concentrate on reading of psalms, and part from the Torah. Confession of sins is important part of it as well. Yom Kippur has common feature with Rosh ha-shanah and it is the white colour, which is the symbol of the New Year as well as the Day of Atonement.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.1.3 Analysis of Jewish Festivals in Singer's Short Story "Grandfather and Grandson"

The main character in the short story "Grandfather and Grandson" is an old man Reb Mordecai Meir, who is an orthodox Jew, following and respecting traditions. He celebrates all the festivals, he prays in the morning, and also in the evening, he does everything what is supposed to be done by a good Jew. The purpose of the analysis of the most important Jewish festivals, which were described in previous subheadings, is to understand what has to be done and what is forbidden, during the celebration of the festivals. It is different from the Christian festivals we celebrate nowadays, because Jewish feasts include much more duties and prohibitions, what make them time-consuming. This is visible in the short story "The Grandfather and Grandson.

*"The winter days were short. Before one had a bite to eat and a nap, it was time to return to the study house for evening prayers. Even though the summer days were long, there were not enough of them. First it was Passover, then the Feast of Omer, and before you could turn around it was Shevuoth. After that came the seventeenth of Tammuz, the Three weeks of mourning for the destruction of the Temple, the nine days of refraining from meat, and the Tishe b'Av, the Sabbath of Comfort. These were followed by the month of Elul, when even fish in water tremble. Later there was Rosh Hashanah, the ten days of Penitence, Yom Kippur, Sukkoth, the Day of Rejoicing in the Law and then Sabbath of Genesis."*<sup>58</sup>

In the excerpt, the main character Reb Mordecai Meir talks about Jewish festivals happening during the year. With regard to the information from the subheadings, festivals took considerable time in person's life, because there are prescribed duties, including special meals that could be eaten during the celebrations, or decorating of homes.

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<sup>57</sup> See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 55-58.

<sup>58</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 406.

Prohibition of work is the major element of all Jewish festivals. Considering the number of festivals and the days spent on celebrating and praying, there is almost no time left for working associated with no earned money for living. He also mentions the significant time, he spend praying during ordinary days. The result is that each Jew should choose between his personal and religious life, there is nothing in between, if person wants to be a real Jew, because there is not enough time for that. This is actually thought of the main character, whose choice is love to God instead of love to his wife, and we can read it in the following quote from the “Grandfather and Grandson”.

“As a boy, Reb Mordecai Meir had already realized that if one wanted to be a real Jew there was no time for anything else.”<sup>59</sup> He was lucky because his wife took care of everything, she run the business, earned money for living, and she never asked him for help. But in the real world, it is impossible to live life like that, and take care of oneself. This is the reason why we can consider that Singer, although he was a Jew, could think that sticking up for old traditions is an anachronism and it would be impossible to live like that in the 20th century. Also if we take into consideration that short story deals with the clash between old and modern world. Grandfather Reb Mordecai Meir, the orthodox Jew, meets his grandson who is a progressive Jew. We can suppose that Singer wanted to show, that old Jewish traditions are no longer so important in Jewish life. On the other hand, another interpretation could be that Singer wanted to refer to increasing disrespect for traditions, which occurred during and after the Second World War because people had to take care of themselves, rather than care about feasts, and he wanted Jewish people to realize that traditions are important, because they hold Jewish nation together despite of Diaspora.

## 4.2 Traditions Connected with Death

Traditions connected with death are also important elements of Jewish folklore together with the whole course of life, but this heading is focused only on death. It is because this element appears in Singer’s short stories. The most important aspects connected with death and mourning, occur in the short stories “Grandfather and Grandson” and “The Gentleman from Cracow”. First example is from the short story called “Grandfather and Grandson”, when Reb Mordecai Meir is dragged into the unknown by policemen.

“Well, let me imagine that it is my funeral,’ Reb Mordecai Meir said to himself. ‘No one will say Kaddish for me anyhow.’”<sup>60</sup>

Second excerpt is from the same short story, but it narrates about the death and funeral of Reb Mordecai Meir’s wife.

*“She passed away on a Wednesday and was buried on Friday afternoon. Since it was just before the Sabbath she was spared the pressure of the grave, which those who are buried on weekdays suffer. Reb Mordecai Meir recited Kaddish for the repose of her soul, prayed before the congregation, studied Mishnah. When thirty days of mourning had passed, a relative took over the shop for four thousand rubbles.”*<sup>61</sup>

In the previous two examples from the short story “Grandfather and Grandson”, the topic of reading the Kaddish, Jewish prayer, is discussed. According to Jewish traditions, Kaddish should be said on the eleventh month after the death or on the anniversary of the death. We can see there the difference between the custom and before Singer’s interpretation in which the Kaddish is said right few days after the funeral, not the eleventh month after the death.<sup>62</sup>

We can find another element connected with the death in the short story “The Gentleman from Cracow” and we find the element in the following excerpt. “The gravedigger gathered the bones and carried them to the cemetery. Half the town began the prescribed seven days of mourning.”<sup>63</sup> Mandatory number of mourning in the short story corresponds with the traditions, because tradition commands the closest relatives to mourn one week, which is seven days. During this period, they are not allowed to leave their home and they sit on the floor. Seven days of mourning is followed by thirty days of mourning, which is the period with not so strict rules.<sup>64</sup> Even this element can be found in Singer’s work, exactly in one of the previous excerpts from the “Grandfather and Grandson“.

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<sup>59</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 406.

<sup>60</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 419.

<sup>61</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 407.

<sup>62</sup> See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 96-98.

<sup>63</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 27.

<sup>64</sup> See Jana Doleželová, Alexandr Putík, and Jiřina Šedinová, *Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 1994), 96-98.

### 4.3 Rabbi, Talmud

Rabbi is a very important person in Jewish society, because he is a role model, an educator and spiritual leader. All these roles are suggested in the Hebrew meaning of the word rabbi, which is a teacher. Rabbi's the most common duty is to lead spiritual services during Ros ha-shanag or during Yom Kippur, and rabbi is also needed during other events like Bar or Bat Mitzvah, weddings or funerals. According to traditions rabbis were always men, but since 1972 it is possible also for women to become rabbis. Rabbis are well-educated because they have to attend seminaries at least for five years. It is worth to mention that rabbis are not always called rabbi, but they can be addressed as rav, rebbe or reb.<sup>65</sup> It is important information for the reader, because it avoids confusion with what is the name of the character and what means rabbi. For example the character from "Grandfather and Grandson" is called Reb Mordecai Meir, but the word Reb means he is a rabbi, although it is capitalized.

Rabbis are important for Jewish religion and also for Jewish folklore, because they are leaders of the communities and they influence people's behavior within essential life situations. I.S. Singer was definitely aware of the Jewish spiritual leader importance, because he used the character of rabbi frequently, and it appears in all four analyzed short stories. In the story "Zeidlus the Pope" and in "Grandfather and Grandson" rabbi is actually the main character. First indication Zeidel Cohen, from "Zeidlus the Pope" being a rabbi is when we read he is knowledgeable and familiar with all Jewish important books. But the main thing why we know that he is rabbi is the fact that he is called Reb Zeidel. The same case is in "Grandfather and Grandson" where the main character is the whole story called Reb Mordecai Meir. Interesting is that Singer did not name them rabbis but he used the less common abbreviation Reb, which is not really known between non-Jewish people, and to recognize it, requires further knowledge of the Jewish culture. Another interesting phenomenon is that Singer used capitalized letter "R" in the word Reb, which is normally written in small letters and it evokes that Reb is part of the characters name, for example Reb Zeidel Cohen or Reb Mordecai Meir. We can suppose that the author assumed the

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<sup>65</sup>See Ariela Pelaia, "What Is a Rabbi? The Role of the Rabbi in the Jewish Community," Judaism.about, <http://judaism.about.com/od/judaismbasics/a/What-Is-A-Rabbi-Jewish-Spiritual-Leader.htm> (accessed March 17, 2012).

readers will be mostly Jewish people and then he did not think it is important to explain the term and moreover, explaining will ruin the whole atmosphere of Jewish settings.

Talmud including Gemara and Mishnah is closely connected with Rabbis, because it is their core studying material. Even Singer used these two elements, a rabbi and Talmud, together in his short stories. Talmud is a collection of rabbinic teachings, which were collected over centuries. Talmud has two parts called Mishnah and Gemara, when Gemara is more frequently mentioned in the short stories. Mishnah is older than Gemara and it is compilation of teachings of sages who lived in the century after year 70 CE. Mishnah is full of different opinions and laws which preserves plurality of Jewish practice. So Mishnah is full of citations from the Bible, and on the other hand, Gemara has lot of other functions. For example, it explains unclear words or phrases, and mainly it provides the connection between the biblical text and everyday life and it provides legal options of its time. Different opinions are discussed and weighed against one another, but it usually does not contain any conclusion.<sup>66</sup> In Singer's analyzed short stories, Talmud, Gemara or even Mishnah appear several times and for the reader who is not familiar with the terms, it is difficult to understand the meaning. But on the other hand, Talmud never has such an important role in the short story, so not explaining what Talmud or Gemara mean is not so confusing. These three elements are always mentioned in the connection with rabbis, who personate on the contrary a crucial role in the plot, and that makes them also important. In the short stories Rabbis are supposed to be knowledgeable men, because through their wisdom they lead the whole community. And because rabbi gets his wisdom and knowledge from studying the most important Jewish books and texts, it is for a rabbi necessary to study mainly Talmud, including Gemara, because it is the collection of the most educated rabbis from the Jewish history. Some examples of using the element of Talmud and Gemara are the following excerpts.

"The Gemara says that a court which sentenced anyone to death even once in seventy years was called a court of murderers."<sup>67</sup> The main character Reb Mordecai Meir does not agree with his grandson's opinion about the conviction to death and Reb Mordecai Meir

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<sup>66</sup>See "Gemara: The Essence of the Talmud," My Jewish Learning, <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Rabbinics/Talmud/Gemara.shtml> (accessed March 18, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 415.

supports his opinion with the comments from Gemara, which actually shows that he believes to wisdom of his ancestors.

*“Zeidel loved only one thing: books. The moment he entered the study house, of his own home for that matter, he ran straight to the shelves and began to leaf through volumes, sucking into his lungs the dust from ancient pages. So strong was his power of memory that one look at some passage in the Talmud, at some new interpretation in a commentary and he could remember it forever.”*<sup>68</sup>

In this excerpt we can read that Zeidel, who is a rabbi, loves reading the books. This is the first evidence of him being knowledgeable, because people who read a lot are generally considered to be smart. We can also see that Talmud is not really the most important information in the short story, but it is useful to know what it is, because only then we can really appreciate the power of Zeidel’s memory. He must be a wise man, when he knows the whole Talmud by heart.

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<sup>68</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011), 170.

## CONCLUSION

In my bachelor thesis, I have analyzed the elements of Jewish folklore in four of Isaac Bashevis Singer's short stories. To be more specific, I focused on three main groups of elements – mythological, biblical and the elements of customs and traditions, because I consider them to be the most significant and the most characteristic for Singer's writing and also for Jewish folklore.

According to an analysis in my bachelor thesis, we can find a lot of important elements of Jewish folklore in Singer's short stories, but also less significant references to Jewish lore can be found there. Although the importance differs, all these elements create together credible atmosphere of Jewish setting. Nowadays, in the era of multiculturalism it is necessary to remember different culture roots, and Jewish roots are deeply connected with Jewish folklore. And because core of Singer's writings is Jewish culture, his short stories help readers to remember and understand the Jewishness.

Jewish folklore elements are essential for analyzed short stories. Main characters are Jews or mythological creatures – mostly demons, and setting is usually in an orthodox Jewish village. Also the characters follow the customs and traditions, for example they celebrate the festivals according to the prescribed rules, and a lot of references to the Hebrew Bible, biblical stories and other Jewish writing are mentioned in the short stories. But Singer's short stories are not only strict following of Jewish culture. He added his own unique elements to the stories, usually via transformation of the superstitions or the mythological beliefs. For example Singer slightly changed the name of the demon Ketev Meriri to Ketev Mriri, or he described demon as creature having claws of geese instead of feet of cock. On the other hand Singer didn't change biblical elements. The reason can be that Singer probably considered biblical elements much more important than superstition and mythology.

As it has been already indicated, Isaac Bashevis Singer used large number of Jewish folklore elements in the short stories and this is the reason why he can be considered as story teller. Nowadays folklore is sometimes neglected, but Jewish folklore will outlast in Singer's short stories for many years or even for centuries.



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