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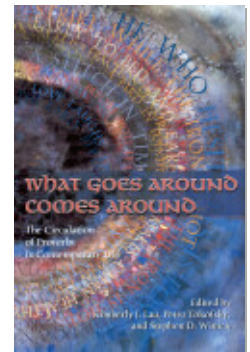
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“From One Act of Charity, the World Is Saved”

Creative Selection of Proverbs in Sephardic Narrative

Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt

Proverbs are used to speak the message in Sephardic narratives, and they do so with “the authority of generations” (Mieder and Mieder 1981, 310). The tale-tellers weave proverbs into their stories with creative selection in a variety of ways. They may choose a proverb as the opening or closing frame and link it in the telling to the heart of the message; they can cement the appeal to the past of the narrative, which begins “many years ago”¹ and ends with the wisdom of the ages; and, in literary fashion, they can even title their narrative with a proverb. Through the creative use of proverbs, the listeners join in active dialogue, indeed in some instances even in dispute, with the narrator. The power then in the use of proverbs in Sephardic narratives lies in the combination of the authority of the past as spoken in proverbs to summarize a moral message and the narrator’s ability to craft the message creatively by choosing just the right proverb.

In his essay, “Proverb Speaking as a Creative Process: The Akan of Ghana,” Kwesi Yankah emphasizes the need to focus on the “situated uses of proverbs”; this approach includes “a close study of the proverb in interaction situations” and a critique of “the view that proverb use is essentially an exercise in quotation” (1986, 195, 196). Yankah emphasizes the dynamic possibilities of the proverb, for as he says, the proverb “is subject to *creative deformation* during performance, even as the proverb retains its historical identity.” He remarks on the importance of tradition and history “in lending acceptability to the proverb,” and he continues,

“for knowledge of history and tradition is, in several cultures, a privilege that may be used to key and heighten performance, authenticate, validate, as well as confer power and authority; and it is to the performer’s advantage to invoke this knowledge to augment his word.” However, for Yankah the appeal to tradition and history is not a static hold, a weight of ages past, but rather a gift to the narrator to reshape and reinterpret by creatively changing and elaborating on the summation of wisdom in the form of the proverb. “Creativity,” Yankah says, “. . . may be interpreted in three senses: 1) the creation of novel proverbs, 2) the timely invocation of an effective proverb in a fitting rhetorical context, and 3) the adaptation and manipulation of existing proverbs” (p. 197).

Our emphasis will be on *creative selection* of proverbs, rather than Yankah’s “creative deformation.” We agree with Yankah’s position that the use of proverbs is much more than “an exercise in quotation” (p. 196). While our work is informed by Arewa’s and Dundes’s article, “Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore,” we differ in our emphasis on creative selection of proverbs. Arewa and Dundes write that the one using the proverb “is but the instrument through which the proverb speaks to the audience” (1964, 70). We will see that the Sephardic audience is not so passive in receiving the wisdom of the tale in proverb form. In many instances, not only does the narrator choose a specific proverb to summarize the tale but the audience actively critiques his choice. There is nothing static or uncontested about the appeal to tradition through the use of a proverb, for there are a variety of appeals that can be made and a plurality of proverbs from which to draw. The process of narration and proverb use is, in sum, a creative, dynamic process. As Barre Toelken writes,

All folklore participates in a distinctive, dynamic process. Constant change, variation within a tradition, whether intentional or inadvertent, is viewed here simply as a central fact of life for folklore, and rather than presenting it in opposed terms of conscious artistic manipulation or forgetfulness, I have sought to accept it as a defining feature that grows out of context, performance, attitude, [and] cultural tastes. (1979, 10)

The Sephardic *konsejas* (folktales) are drawn from those collected by Isaac Jack Lévy over a period of forty years (1960–2000) from his grandmother, Sarota Amato Musafir; his mother, Caden

Lévy Israel; his father, Baruch Israel;² and other relatives and close family friends. All of these people originated in Turkey and Rhodes (Greece). They all shared in the rich traditions of Sephardic life. The language of the home was Judeo-Spanish, and the chief entertainment in the evenings was the telling of *konsejas*. Isaac remembers such storytelling sessions from his childhood in Rhodes:

I recall that on wintry rainy evenings, men and women gathered in a neighbor's house, shared a meal, and told one story after another until they had to retire for the night. The telling of stories was also popular during the cool summer evenings when people gathered in the patios, seated among the blooming flower pots and under the lattice with its hanging vines. . . . There was no stopping once the narration of tales began. Time was of no consequence, especially when the master tellers took the floor. Many a time, I recall how the stories mesmerized those present. In our family circle, the narratives began with serious—didactic, moral, religious—themes and as the night advanced, they took a lighter vein. All present were ready for some laughter, and the stories dealing with Djuha, marital affairs, and the frivolous, were welcomed. There was humor in the air. In this atmosphere of gaiety, when everyone was oblivious of the daily problems, men and women would join with their tales, hilarious jokes, even with obscene stories. Of course, by now all the children were asleep. (Lévy 1989, 69–70)

Years later, when as a college student, Isaac began to collect all manner of Sephardic folklore, his family members were doubly willing to share with him. Ballads, proverbs, folktales, folk beliefs were all a natural part of their daily lives. They responded to Isaac's keen interest in collecting the folklore with a somewhat shocked and appreciative wonder as if to say, "Why should anyone—and especially our Isaac who is studying in college—be interested in such things?" As our mother, Caden Lévy Israel, remarked when both Rosemary and Isaac together collected materials from her, "I can't say anything, but they write it down!" The transcribed and translated texts of the *konsejas* show clearly the comfort of family members—father, mother, and grandmother—in sharing their stories with their son and grandson; and sharing more than stories, for in these texts are lessons in wisdom, clearly conveyed in the wise words of proverbs.

In his classic work *The Proverb*, Archer Taylor discusses the relationship between proverbs and narrative. Taylor particularly

focuses on the origin of proverbs—whether this be the proverb deriving from a narrative, or a narrative giving story to a proverb. While the question of origins is a hapless and frustrating enterprise that we eschew, we find provocative Taylor’s comments on the connection between the proverb and the fable:

There may perhaps be certain classes of stories which yield proverbs more readily than others. The Aesopic fable, for example, stands godfather to many a proverb: *Sour grapes; A dog in the manger; Don’t kill the goose that lays the golden eggs; Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched.* . . . I am not sure that the Latin proverb *We lose the certain things, while we seek the uncertain ones* . . . alludes to the fable of the dog which lost its meat by snapping at the reflection in the water. (1962, 28)

As if continuing a conversation with Taylor on the link between fable and proverb, Ruth Finnegan observes in “Proverbs in Africa,” “A moralizing story may end with, or imply, a proverb to drive home its point” (1981, 12). She notes the “close connection between proverbs and other forms of oral literature” and specifically refers to the work by H. Chatelain among the Kimbundu of Angola in the latter part of the nineteenth century: “Proverbs are closely related to anecdotes, so much so that anecdotes are sometimes just illustrations of a proverb, while a proverb is frequently an anecdote in a nutshell” (p. 12).³

For the Sephardim, *proverbio* comes from the same Latin root as the English word “proverb”: “*prô-* forth + *verbum* word, (originally) a speaking, speech” (Barnhart 1974, 2:1661), an etymology which places the emphasis squarely on the *process* of speaking. Additionally, a proverb may be referred to as *refran*, or *reflan*, meaning “adage, saying, proverb, maxim” (Nehama 1977, 469).⁴ Joseph Nehama, in his *Dictionnaire du Judéo-Espagnol*, even quotes a proverb about proverbs—or a metaproverb—“*Refrán mentirozo no ay*” (*There is no lying [false] proverb*) (p. 469).

In *Prolegomena to the Study of the Refranero Sefardi* (1969), Lévy notes the lack of a specific term for proverb in medieval Spain. “Instead, an author quite regularly used a formula, a word, or an adjective when quoting a common or classical phrase adopted by the people. In the *exempla* and other philosophical and didactic works, when the authority of a sage was desired, the author preceded the saying by a formula, *Los antiguos dicen* [The

ancestors say], or *Como dize el sabio* [As the wise one says]" (p. 18).

Still, a range of terms often replaced the formulaic opening. Included among these was *retraire*, *retrayre* or *retraere*, in common usage from 1250, "which means to go back, to repeat, to tell, to think or to recall an old story or teaching worthy of remembrance" (Lévy 1969, 19). There were also other terms—"brocardi[c]o, castigo, conseja, dicho, escritura, exemplo, . . . sentencia, verbo, verso, . . . and vulgar"—which all "imply a lesson or judgment derived from a fable" or a folktale (Lévy 1969, 18). One of the most important terms which Lévy identifies, *fabla*, was also glossed as "*fabiella, fabilla, fabriella, fabrilla,*" and most interestingly, as *habla* (language, talk), which again emphasizes the importance of speaking (p. 18). Lévy continues, "These terms, found as early as 1200, denote not only a *fábula* but also the lesson obtained from it, and in time the reference condensed into a proverb: 'Esta *fabla* compuesta de Yosete sacada (*Libro de buen amor*, Qtr. 96)" (Lévy 1969, 18–19).⁵

The Judeo-Spanish folktale—known as *kuento* or *konseja*, the latter derived from *konsejar*, to advise, to teach—may itself be framed by proverbs as Isaac's mother did in her narration of "Marido, maredo" [Husband, Log].⁶ She began, "Ken kon peros se echa kon pulgas se alvanta [He who goes to bed with dogs wakes up with fleas]"; and she closed, "Ansi es ke 'Antes ke te kazes, mira lo ke azes'" [Thus it is that 'Before you get married, see what you are doing']. The tale opens with Simha, a widow, drinking Turkish coffee with her friend Rebeka: "When Simha mentioned the name of Avraam, the deceased, Rebeka, as was customary, said, 'May he rest in peace. May we be among the living.' But Simha jumped and said [of her husband], 'El guerko se lo yevo i el guerko ke se lo guadre!' [The devil took him and may the devil keep him!]."

There ensues a discussion about the worth of husbands, with Simha saying they are all worthless, and Rebeka saying hers is an "*alma del Dyo*" [a saint]. Simha says,

"Look, let's play a trick. I'm going to give you a potion that is going to make you as if you are dead. When your dear one comes home, I'm going to talk to him, and you listen to the conversation." . . . When [Rebeka's husband] came home and saw that his wife was

lying in bed, all white and lifeless, he started . . . to cry big tears. Simha took his hand . . . and told him that before dying, Rebeka begged her not to leave him alone [but] to [marry] Avram. Avram replies with great sighing, “And she said it to me, and she said it to me.” At that moment, Rebeka opened her eyes and [yelled at her husband], “Son of a jackass, when did I tell you that?” Thus it is that “Antes ke te kazes mira lo ke azes” [Before you get married, see what you are doing.]

The same proverb that begins this story concludes the story of “La media ermana” [The Half Sister]:

One day, the son of Djuha comes to see his father. He says, “Papa, I have found the most beautiful girl, and I am going to marry her.” Djuha asks, “Who is she?” And his son replies, “She is the daughter of the butcher.” Djuha says, “You can’t marry her; she is your half sister.”

Each time that the son comes to the father to tell about meeting a young woman he wishes to marry, Djuha tells him that he can’t because she is his half sister. Finally, the mother asks her son why he is so sad. He says, “Each time that I talk with my father and I say who I am going to marry, he tells me that I can’t because she is my half sister. I don’t know what I’m going to do!” The mother says to him, “Son, you can marry anyone you choose. Djuha isn’t even your father.”

The narrator concludes the story, “See how Djuha ‘se echo kon pers i se levanto kon pulgas’ [Djuha ‘lay down with dogs and got up with fleas’]. That is to say that Djuha lay down with other women without knowing that his own wife was also having her own affairs.”⁷

The narrator may elect to open the narrative with a formulaic phrase, which serves to alert the listener that a story is to follow, end with a proverb, and sandwich a proverb in the midst of the narration. Isaac’s father, Baruch Israel, did just that in his story of “The Anti-Semite.”⁸ He began, “In the time of old Russia, there was a Jew who was a peddler. . . . He used to go to all the villages to sell [clothes]. There was a village at a distance where everyone was an anti-Semite, and they were against the Jews. He was afraid of that village.” The peddler met a man who encouraged him to come to his village, the one of the anti-Semites. “When a week passed, two, the business was going poorly. This Jew remembered that person who told him to go to the village. Even

though he knew that 'Di lus malus nu se aspera dinguna bondad' [From evil people no one expects any goodness], even so he took a little chance." The peddler had "to earn a living [so] he decided to go to the village of the anti-Semitic people."

Isaac's father continued with the story, but pointedly asked him if he understood:

Well! When he went to that village, the people already saw that he was a Jew. Do you understand? [Directed to Isaac] They took him, they grabbed him, they accused him. The man says, "What have I done?" "Oh, you," he says, "are the one who killed Christ," he says. "I?" he says. "I don't have any news about it; I was not he." "No?" he says. "You're not Jewish?" "Yes," he says, "I'm Jewish, but—" "You are the one who did the killing," he says.

The villagers took him before a tribunal, and the verdict was that "the Jew killed Christ. So. 'You who are a Jew, you are of the same race, and the guilt falls on you.'" The man engaged a lawyer who "instead of helping him, told him, 'They're right . . . because you are of that race, and you must pay for the sin that they have committed.'" The peddler saw that there was no remedy and asked for one last wish. "He says, 'I want to go to church.'"

When he entered the church, he went to the Christ, and he spoke to him in his ear. Everyone is looking at him. "Is he crazy, this one? What is it?" He spoke in the ear, [and] then he put his own ear to the Christ so that [Christ] may speak to him. When he finished speaking to Christ, he started to laugh. He started to laugh, he came down [from the crucifix], [and] says, "All right. Let's go now," he says. "Now I'm happy," he says. They say, "What is happening that you are happy now?" He says, "That is for me to know." "No," they say. "You must tell it to us."

"The truth is that I spoke with Christ; he told me, 'What they are doing to you,' he says, 'they did to me also, to me,' he says. 'When I was alive, nobody loved me. Everyone wanted to kill me. They are going to kill you,' he says. 'They are going to hang you, and then they are going to ask for forgiveness. They, their children, their grandchildren—they are all going to ask you to forgive them, and they are going to throw themselves at your feet.'" "Ah!" [the people] say, "That's what you want to do, eh? It's not enough that we already got duped by one," they say, "and now we are going to be duped by another," they say. "To the street. Throw out this bastard." And they took him and they threw him into the street, and the man saved himself.

Isaac's father concludes, "This proves that 'Kun il djidio ni el guerku la kita' [With the Jew, not even the devil succeeds]." And then he turned to Isaac and said, "Do you know, 'Para un dimzis si keru un kademsis' [For a bastard, you need a son of a bitch]. That's how the good Jew saved himself." And Isaac's mother, who was listening, added, "Kon el djenio se salva del fuego" [With ingenuity, one saves oneself from the fire (trouble)].⁹

In some instances, the narrator used a proverb as a way of summarizing the wisdom of the tale. Isaac's mother began the story of "El Hap" [The Pill]:

I'm going to tell you about a very unhappy marriage in which every time that the husband came home from a hard day's work, he would hear his wife complain without end. This poor man didn't know what else to do. Every day that God created, he would listen to his companion of many years speak evil of one thing or another. She always complained of her unfortunate destiny. Tired of life, he tells her that it was time to see the chief rabbi of the city about giving him a divorce.¹⁰

Together the husband and wife petitioned the rabbi for a divorce. After listening to their complaints, the rabbi spoke to each one separately. "To the wife, he gives some pills and tells her to take one half an hour before the arrival of her husband." These, he said, would make her happier and allow her to tolerate her husband for another month, "but he warns her that if she would open her mouth before one hour had passed after she had taken the pill, she would die because the pill had poison inside."

For thirty days, the man came home from his work and sat in his armchair with a *meze*, an appetizer, resting after a long day at work. Meanwhile, the wife did not say a word and continued cooking for her husband. She, frightened of dying, did not open her mouth at all. In such a manner, the thirty days passed, but neither one nor the other fought.

At the end of the month, neither wanted a divorce. The rabbi explained to the wife that the pills had not been poison but were just made of sugar water. It was necessary, he said, for her to give her husband thirty minutes to rest after his day at work.

Isaac's mother concluded the narrative, "The two thanked the rabbi for his good advice and understood that in life each person must have a little solitude in order to rest and to think and that this does not mean that one does not love his wife." And then she

remarked directly to Isaac, "The *konseja* tells us that in a marriage, as in everything one does in life, we have to give our dear ones a moment to breathe and that paying 'Muncha atension i posesion atabafa al ombre'" [Too much attention and possession suffocates an individual]. When her daughter concluded the story, Isaac's grandmother turned to him and said, "Muncho avlar, mucho yerrar [The more one speaks, the more one errs], and she added, "For this reason, the human being has to guard against what he says and when he says it."¹¹ At another telling, Isaac's mother concluded the story with the following proverb: "El mucho avlar arrebuelve" [A lot of talk agitates]. When Isaac asked his father what *arrebuelve* meant, he explained it with another proverb, "El mucho avlar dezrepoza" [A lot of talk upsets]. The third time Isaac collected this story, the narrator concluded, "Ken mucho avla poko el repoza" [He who talks much, rests little], and then immediately explained this with the proverb, "Poko avlar, salud para el kuerpo" [Little talk is healthy for the body]. Thus, each time this *konseja* was told to Isaac, the narrator encapsulated the moral as he or she saw it by voicing a different proverb.

In the story about "The Rabbi and the Sinner," Isaac's father concluded on one occasion with a single proverb, and on another, with four. The *konseja* begins,

There was once a much-sainted rabbi who was highly respected both by Jews and Turks. There was nothing in the world that he would not do for God's children. He spent every hour of the day helping his flock and reading the Law of Moses. His fame was so well known throughout the lands. This rabbi had only one constant concern. For several nights, he dreamt that upon dying, they buried him at the foot of the city butcher, who was an evil person, a shameless person, a thief, a liar. He could never understand the reason for the dream and why the Master of the Universe paid him back with this dishonor.¹²

The rabbi went to the butcher and asked him to tell his life story. The butcher said that "there was nothing to tell and, as everyone already knew, he had no friend." As he represented himself, he was an evil person with one purpose in life: "to make a lot of money." Persistently, the rabbi questioned the butcher and begged him not to leave out a single incident.

As Isaac's father recounted,

The butcher continued with his *darshar* (narration).¹³ Finally, he tells the rabbi that one Friday . . . he was passing through a wood where he saw some thieves who were trying to abuse a young girl. He felt so upset for the poor thing that he begged them to let [her] go and that he would give them all the money that he had on him in order for them not to touch her. The thieves, seeing that this rich Jew was carrying so much money, agreed to what he said; they took the moneybag and ran away. The rabbi did not want to hear any more. He got up, kissed the hand of the butcher, and told him with great emotion, “You, my son, are blessed by the Holy God. God knows what he does. For me, it is a great honor to be buried at your feet.”

Isaac’s father concluded, “This teaches us that man, no matter how evil he may always be, he can be redeemed. Among all the evil that he may cause, if he does one action to save his fellowman, the Master of the World takes this action as *kapara* (sacrifice), a substitute, and forgives all his sins. Thus it is, ‘Azi lo bueno i toparas lo bueno’ [Do good, and good will come to you]. Isaac’s mother, who was listening to the story, clearly desired to make a more literal connection between a proverb and the tale. She remarked, “This proverb is not correct. It should be, ‘Aun al malo, el Dyo lo rihme’” [Even to the evil person, God redeems].

Three years later, in March 1972, Isaac asked his father to tell the tale once again. Isaac’s father concluded the story with the same proverb, “Azi lo bueno i toparas lo bueno” [Do good and good will come to you], and then explained, “Es ansi ke ‘Azi bien i no mires a ken’ porke ‘Por un zahut, por una sola mizva, se salva el mundo’” [It is thus that ‘Do good and don’t pay attention to whom you do it’ because ‘For one good deed, for a single mizva, the world is saved’]. In the latter proverb, Isaac’s father combined two proverbs with the same meaning: “Por un zahut se salva el mundo” [For a good deed, the world is saved] and “Por una [sola] mizva, se salva el mundo” [From one act of charity, the world is saved]. Thus, Isaac’s father ended the tale with one proverb, encapsulated the meaning of the narrative with another, and explained its meaning with two other proverbs.

Isaac’s mother began the following story by saying, “I’m going to tell you the story of ‘Sfuegra, ni di baru buena’” [Mother-in-Law, Not Even of Clay Is Good]. Then she anchored it in the authority of the family: “This is a story my mother told to me.” She continued,

A daughter-in-law did not care for the mother-in-law and spoke badly about her to a neighbor. This neighbor did not have a mother-in-law, and she, to see, would say, "All [women] have mothers-in-law, and I shouldn't have one!" What did she do? She took clay and made a mother-in-law and placed her in a corner. Every time she passed, walked, she bumped into it. She would remove it from this place; she would place it in another. She would pass by there, and by there would bump herself. Finally, she got angry, took [it], and threw it into the river. When she threw it into the river, she said, "The river splashed me and soiled me all over with clay." And at the end, she said, "Sfuegra, ni di baru buena [Mother-in-law, not even of clay [is] good]. Even though I threw her into the river, she still caused me harm."¹⁴

Isaac's mother concluded, "This means that no one wants a mother-in-law."

As was his custom when collecting narratives, Isaac asked his mother to repeat this story half an hour later. This time she prefaced her story with, "This is the proverbial hate for a mother-in-law," showing her conscious link between the proverb and the moral of the story. The narrative was almost precisely the same, save for the ending, in which Isaac's mother intensified the harm caused by the mother-in-law: "When she threw her into the river, the sand splashed her and dirtied her all over with clay. She finally said, "Mother-in-law, not even of clay is good. Even though I threw her into the river, she harmed me. Even though I threw her into the sea, she still hurt me." She concluded in the same fashion as the first time: "This means that no one wants a mother-in-law."

In his article on the Judeo-Spanish proverb, Jesús Cantera Ortiz de Urbina remarks, "Of the various interpretations that were given in order to explain the proverb, Suegra, ni de barro buena, the most credible . . . is the one that tells, . . ." and here Cantera proceeds to recount in truncated form what must be another version of the previous narratives. A married man had a clay statue as a memento of his mother, and when it broke, "the delighted daughter-in-law exclaimed, 'Mother-in-law, not even of clay is good'" (Cantera 1997, 154). Tracing this proverb back to the Spanish Middle Ages, Cantera attributes it to the Marqués de Santillana's *Refranes que dicen las viejas tras el fuego* and to several medieval authors. Cantera also lists the following rhyming variation

of the proverb: “Suegra, ni de azúcar buena; nuera, ni de barro ni de cera” [Mother-in-law, not even of sugar good; daughter-in-law, not even of clay nor of wax].

Cantera continues, “Moreover there is another magnificent one” from the work of Gonzalo Correas, *Vocabulario de refranes y frases proverbiales*. “It says, Suegra, ninguna buena; hicela de azúcar, y amargóme; hicela de barro, y descalabróme (Mother-in-law, none good; I made her of sugar, and she made me bitter; I made her of clay, and she cracked my skull).” Cantera continues quoting Correas:

A married woman without a mother-in-law, writes Correas, heard it said that mothers-in-law were evil. Not believing it, she desired to try out a mother-in-law. Her husband told her that she was better off without one. To satisfy her craving, she made one of sugar. The husband in the dark [secretly] coated it with aloe [a bitter substance]. The daughter-in-law embraced it and kissed it, and found it bitter. She said, “This one did not come out good. I want another one of clay.” She made another and stood it up; she wanted to embrace her. And as the statue was heavy, it fell on her, and cracked her skull. And she remained disillusioned with mothers-in-law. (Cantera 1997, 154)

Right after his mother had finished telling him the story of “Mother-in-law, Not Even of Clay Is Good,” Isaac asked her to tell the tale of the hazelnut. His mother began the story, “The same way, another daughter-in-law did not care for her mother-in-law.” She continued,

One day, the mother-in-law got up and began to toast some hazelnuts in the oven. To see if they were well toasted, she placed one in her mouth. The poor woman, since she could not eat [did not have any teeth], she moved it from one side [of her mouth] to the other. In the evening, when her son arrived, he asked his wife, “And my mother, what is she doing?” The daughter-in-law said of her mother-in-law, “All day long she is eating and chewing.” When the son asked her, “Mother, what are you eating?” the mother replies, “My son,” she said, “I do not have any teeth. From the morning, when I placed a hazelnut in my mouth, I have moved it from one side to the other, and I am not able to eat it.” And this is what the unfortunate mother-in-law is eating, and the daughter-in-law cannot see it. She did not care for her. And this is proof that ‘Una madri es para mil

ijos i mil ijós para una madri no” [A mother for a thousand sons, and a thousand sons not for one mother].

Isaac’s mother ended the story with a variant of the following proverb, which is better known and which she used frequently to remark on a mother’s devotion to her children and, concomitantly, on children’s neglect of their mother: “Una madri para sien ijós i no sien ijós para una madri” [A mother for one hundred children, but not one hundred children for one mother]. On another telling, Isaac’s mother ended the tale with the proverb, “Ilmuera, dolor di muela” [Daughter-in-law, pain in the molar].¹⁵

In still another tale, it is the child who teaches the parents how they should care for their parents. As well as his father, several Sephardim told this tale to Isaac. Its power lies in its parallel to specific situations in life, for at least two individuals told Isaac that they had known of such cases of neglect, and Isaac recalls one from Rhodes in the late 1930s.

An old man lived with his son and daughter-in-law. This woman could not stand her father-in-law. She always treated him badly. She fed him in a corner of the kitchen and spoke to him as if he were a donkey. The husband was hurt to see how his wife treated his father but did not say anything because he was afraid of her.

One day, when the son and his wife came home, they saw their son seated on a small bench with a knife in his hand, cutting a piece of wood. They asked him, “What are you doing?” The child replied, “I am making a fork and a spoon for you when you are old.” The father asked him, “Why are you doing this?” The child replied, “I love you a lot and because of it, I am preparing a fork and a spoon for when you will get old. I want you to have the same as grandfather has.”

The husband looked at his wife and said, “‘Look what you are doing. Our future will be such as my father’s.’ From that day on, the life of the old man changed as if it were a miracle. From this moment on, they treated him as a *balabay* (the master of the home). They set him at the head of the table; they gave him the best to eat.” Isaac’s father concluded, “The proverb says that ‘Uno tiene ke tratar a otros komo kere ke lo traten a el mizmo’” [One has to treat others as he wants to be treated].¹⁶

Proverbs are employed in another way to frame narratives: as the title of the story. At first, this seemed the perfect example of

an opening frame, a proverb that named the narrative to follow. We, however, came to realize that this, itself, was a literary influence. Written stories are given titles, and so the literate person would give a title to the story. Perhaps even more to the point, we often entitled the narrative with the proverb at the end of the tale. Our own desire for classification in written form led almost intuitively to using proverbs for the title. There is, of course, nothing wrong with giving narratives a title. Our good friend and colleague, Matilda Koen-Sarano, as she told us, also gives proverbs as titles to the narratives she publishes so prolifically.¹⁷ However, for us in this work, the pitfall lies in assuming that the people themselves did that. Indeed, it helps to return to the words of the people. In telling a story, a narrator would say, “Lis vo a kontar la konseja de . . .” [I am going to tell you the story about . . .], and the listener would ask the narrator to “Kontime/Kontimos la konseja de . . .” [Tell me/Tell us the story about . . .]. Thus, both the narrator and the listener placed the emphasis on the act of narration.¹⁸

So well did the Sephardim know the proverbs, they didn’t even have to complete them. The narrator telling the story, “Los chapines apretados” [The Tight Shoes], of a father who no longer complained about his tight shoes after seeing a man without legs ended in elliptical fashion:¹⁹ “The father realized that ‘La persona ke no se kontenta kon lo suyo . . .’ [The person who is not happy with what he has . . .]. In similar fashion, Kwesi Yankah observes, “The proverb’s already condensed form is subjected to further abbreviation on the assumption that both speaker and listener share the same socio-cultural history and do not require the use of elaborated codes for mutual understanding” (1986, 210).²⁰

Proverb use in Sephardic narratives is the essence of creativity. When Isaac asked Shaul Angel Malahi if tales always ended with a proverb, he responded, “Generally it ends with a proverb; if there is no proverb, I invent one!”²¹ This remark followed Malahi’s personal narrative about his grandmother catching him smoking cigars in the outhouse when he was young and convincing him never to smoke again by telling him something “very beautiful.” The grandmother took a branch from a fig tree and told Malahi to make it stand straight. He said to her, “How can I make it stand straight when it has been crooked for so many years?” Then she showed him a pine tree and told him to bend it down. He responded, “The pine tree has grown straight, and no one can make

it bend down." His grandmother concluded, "Thus it is with a person: 'Kuando krese tuguerto, grande no se puede enderechar' [When one grows up twisted, once grown, one cannot straighten up]. Now promise me to smoke no more; thus, [be] like the pine tree. No one can do you harm, no one. Because as the Bible says, 'La persona es komo el arvol del kampo'" [The person is like the tree of the field].

While Malahi's remark about inventing proverbs was more likely in the spirit of humor, still he pointed to the flexible use of proverbs, the choice and selectivity of making the proverb fit the way one chooses with the spirit of the narrative as one wishes to interpret it. Kwesi Yankah remarks specifically on this:

The speaker's creative genius may be measured on the basis of his discreet *choice* of a proper mode of proverb use in a fitting argument or discourse. Creativity here is defined in terms of propriety of proverb choice, or rather proverb congruence in an appropriate context. But creativity in proverb use also consists in the conscious embellishment and manipulation of proverb form and meaning. (1986, 203)

This creative pairing of the proverb with the narrative shows the integral link between what folklorists designate as two separate genres. For the Sephardim, there are no rigid categories for narrative genres: The emphasis is on the process of narrating, the process of speaking the proverb, the process of telling the tale. While they would recognize the distinction between a *konseja* and a *proverbio* or *refran*, they would see using proverbs in narrative as simply a way to drive home the message, and quite explicitly so. Isaac was told two versions of the story about the father who was teaching his foolish son to behave by having him imitate everything he did.

One night, he saw that his father went to bed with his mother, and he went to bed with his grandmother. On seeing this, the father grew upset about not being able to do anything with his son; he called him, and, full of fury, he commanded him not to do this again. The son couldn't understand the words of the father and seeing his red face, he said, "Well! Look at my father. He goes to bed every night with my mother, and I don't say a word. I go to bed one night with his mother, and he is burning up."

The narrator ended, “You know that in this world, ‘Ken hamor nase, hamor muere’” [He who is born a jackass, dies a jackass].

Years later, Isaac’s father told him the same story and ended, “You who already know about proverbs must know, ‘Palo tuerto nunca se enderecha’” [A crooked branch will never grow straight].²² His father, of course, was directly referring to Isaac’s work on proverbs—“You who already know about proverbs.”

This assumption of shared knowledge was not singled out for Isaac alone. Following Richard Bauman’s remarks on performance, we can say that the Sephardim form a “speech community” and that they draw on “a structured set of distinctive communicative means . . . in . . . culture-specific ways to key the performance frame,” and thus set off as performance all “that takes place within that frame” (1984, 16). Also referring to shared knowledge, Gregory Bateson observes that “the quality and characteristics of metacommunication” between individuals depend on the degree to which they know each other and the extent to which they are mutually aware of “each other’s perceptions” (1987, 209–10). Our focus on the creative use of proverbs in narratives and the way in which the tellers select the proverbs to communicate the message as pointedly as the pine tree that has grown straight is not in our view metanarration, as Bateson defines it and others discuss it. There is nothing *meta* or above or outside of the narrative process in the conjoining of proverbs and narratives. The proverbs are an integral part of the performance. The essence of the *konseja* and the proverb is on the conveying of wisdom and making wise the foolish.

Notes

1. The Judeo-Spanish orthography differs from modern Spanish. Several phrases were used to begin the narrative: “*Andi avia di ser*” [Once upon a time/There was once]; “*Al tiempo*” [In the past]; “*Aze antanyos*” or “*Antanyo*” [Many years ago/In ancient times]; “*Un dia de los dias*” [Once upon a time]; “*Savesh komo un dia [. . . una vez]*” [Do you know how some time ago/ . . . once]; “*Segun nuestros padres [. . . dezian nuestros padres]*” [According to our ancestors/As our ancestors said]; “*Les vo a kontar. . .*” [I am going to tell you . . .].

There were several phrases to end the narrative. For happy occasions: "Eyos tengan bien i mozotros tambien" [May they have good fortune, and we also]; "I bivieron alegres toda la vida" [And they lived happily all their life]; "Eyos dukados, mozotros salvados" [They (should receive) ducats, and we be saved]. For sad occasions: "Leshos de mozotros" [May it be far from us/It should not happen to us]; "Eyos ayi, mozotros aki" [They (should remain) there, and we here]. See Crews 1935.

2. Isaac's grandmother, Sarota Amato Musafir, was born circa 1889 in Milas, Turkey; she died in 1970 in Atlanta, Georgia. His mother, Caden Lévy Israel, born in Milas in 1905, moved with her mother, who was widowed at the age of eighteen, to Rhodes, then Turkey, circa 1920. Widowed with two sons at the age of twenty-five, Caden Lévy left Rhodes with her son, Isaac, her mother, her father-in-law, and other family members to go as refugees to Tangier, Morocco, in 1939; and from there to Atlanta, Georgia, in February 1945. In 1947, she remarried Baruch Israel, who was born in Rhodes circa 1900 and had immigrated to New York City in 1910. Baruch Israel died in Atlanta in 1978, and Isaac's mother died in Atlanta in 2000.
3. As Finnegan writes,

This is sometimes apparent in the local terminology, for proverbs are not always distinguished by a special term from other categories of verbal art. The Nyanja *mwambi*, for instance, refers to story, riddle, or proverb, the Ganda *olugero* means, among other things, a saying, a story, a proverb, and a parable, and Mongo *bokolo* is used of all poetic expression including fable, proverb, poetry, and allegory . . . the Limba *mboro* refers to story, riddle, and parable as well as to sayings which we might term proverbs, while the Fulani *tindol* can mean not only a popular moral story but also a proverb or maxim. (1981, 12)

4. Translated from the French by the authors.
5. For a fuller discussion of the terms for proverb, see Chapter 1, "The Spanish Proverb: The Semantic History of the Term," in Lévy 1969, 15–32. See also O'Kane 1950.
6. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in March 1968. AT 1350, "The Loving Wife" (Thompson 1973, 400–401); see also Haboucha 1992, 555–56.
7. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, in Columbia, South Carolina, in April 1974. In the fall of 2002, at the American Folklore Society, a fellow folklorist told us the following variant of this story, which had been told to her in April 1998 by a relative. On 10 January 2001, the colleague sent it to us by e-mail:

One Sunday morning, Chelsea burst into the living quarters at the White House and said, "Dad! Mom! I have some great news for you. I am getting married to the greatest hunk in Washington. He lives in Georgetown, and his name is Matt." After dinner, the president took Chelsea aside. "Honey, I have to talk with you. Your mother and I have been married a long time. She's a wonderful wife, but she's never offered much excitement in the bedroom, so I used to fool around with women a lot. Matt is actually your half brother, and I'm afraid you can't marry him."

Chelsea was heartbroken. After eight months, she eventually started dating again. A year later, she came home and very proudly announced, "Robert asked me to marry him. We're getting married in June." Again her father insisted on another private conversation and broke the sad news, "Robert is your half brother, too, honey. I'm awfully sorry about this." Chelsea was furious. She finally decided to go to her mother with the news. "Dad has done so much harm. I guess I'm never going to get married," she complained. "Every time I fall in love, Dad tells me the guy is my half brother." Hillary just shook her head. "Don't pay any attention to what he says, dear. He's not really your father."

8. Told to Lévy by his father, Baruch Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in January 1965.
9. *Estar en fuego*: "to be in the middle of fire/to be in trouble."
10. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, on several occasions over a period of years. The quoted passages are from the version told on 15 April 1984.
11. For the importance of the use of words, see the chapter on "The Power of Speech," in Lévy and Zumwalt 2002, 74–93.
12. Told to Lévy by his father, Baruch Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in August 1969.
13. *Darshar*, Arabic: "to preach"; *darsar*, Hebrew: "to deliver a sermon."
14. For a different version, see "Suegra" in Saporta y Beja 1978, 180; AT 903C (Thompson 1973, 312). For a superb, scholarly annotation of this tale type, see Haboucha, "Not Even in Pictures" (1992, 379–80).
15. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1965. See also Nehama 1977, 386; Perahya et al. 1994, 127.
16. Told to Lévy by his father, Baruch Israel, in Atlanta Georgia, in December 1972. AT 980A, "The Half Carpet." "A man gives his old father half a carpet to keep him warm. The child keeps the other half and tells his father that he is keeping it for him when he grows old" (Thompson 1973, 344). See Haboucha for other Judeo-Spanish variants (1992, 492–94). In a similar vein, but

without chagrin, the father could see himself reflected in his son.

Elijah was old. One day, the son went with his father to the mosque in order to see where he was going to bury him. The son showed the father the corner where he was going to place him. The father told him to choose another corner because he already placed his own father in the first spot. It is already known that they both are the same. As the proverb says, “Tal padre, tal ijo” [Like father, like son].

Told to Lévy and Zumwalt in Ramat Gan, Israel, in May 1990 at Bet Avot Recanati.

For more narratives, see Alexander and Noy 1989; Crews 1935; Koen-Sarano 1986, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2003; Kolonomos 1978; and Molho 1960, 118–33.

18. The proverb, “No mires lo ke te dizen, azi lo ke mejor saves” [Don’t pay attention to what they say; do what you know best], which was used to title one of our narratives, is rendered in similar fashion by Don Juan Manuel in *El Conde Lucanor* for the folktale entitled, “Lo que aconteció a un buen hombre con su hijo” [What Happened to an Honest Man with his Son]. The proverb is, “Por miedo de las críticas, no dejéis de hacer lo que más conveniente pareciere ser” [For fear of criticism, don’t fail to do that which would seem to be the most convenient] (1945, 17).
19. Told to Lévy by Regina Levy, originally from Antalya, Turkey, in 1951 in the Bronx, New York. For a different version, “Todo es relativo” [All Is Relative], see Koen-Sarano 1995, 148.
20. Here are some other elliptical sayings: “Una madre para sien hijos . . . (i no sien ijos para una madre)” [A mother for a hundred children . . . (and not a hundred children for a mother)], “Aharva kulo . . . (ke no pedo)” [Strike the ass . . . (that did not fart)], “Kemar en la shorva (for ‘ken se kema en la shorva’) ashopla en el yogurt” [He who gets burned by the soup blows on the yogurt], “A gota a gota . . . (se inche la bota)” [Drop by drop . . . (the barrel gets full)].
21. Told to Lévy and Zumwalt by Shaul Angel Malahi in Jerusalem, in July 1985.
22. Told to Lévy by a resident of the Sephardic Old Age home in Brooklyn, New York, in 1968, and by his father, Baruch Israel, in 1972 in Atlanta, Georgia. This proverb is a variation of the one used by Malahi’s grandmother: “Kuando krese tuguerto, grande no se puede enderechar” [When one grows up twisted, once grown, one cannot straighten up]. A popular saying used as sarcasm was, “*direchu komu il kuerno*” [straight as the horn].

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