"A Jewish Drunk Is Hard to Find": Jewish Drinking Practices and the Sobriety Stereotype in Eastern Europe

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Indeed, one frequently observes in life how great and even monumental consequences are the product of minute causes. A peasant sows wheat; a miller mills some of it into flour; the rest finds its way to a distillery where it is made into vodka; a portion of both is delivered to Gittel the tavernkeeper; she adds a bit of yeast and water to the flour, kneads it, and rolls it into knishes; in her pantry, thanks to the Phoenicians, who invented the art of glassmaking thousands of years ago, are some glasses; and when the vodka is poured into them, and the hot knishes are put on platters, and these are set before a band of hungry and thirsty Jews, there is no telling what may happen . . .

S.Y. Abramowitsh, The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third

The Jews, according to the Polish noble and social reformer Antoni Ostrowski, “are always sober, and this virtue should be conceded: drunks are rare among Jews.” This seemed to be the consensus among Polish elites during the nineteenth century, the era of the partitions. Only Jews, it was believed, were immune from the current epidemic of drunkenness that had depleted the Polish nation’s strength at a time when strength was most desperately needed. Even prominent Catholic clergy admonished parishioners to learn from the temperance of the country’s Jews. “Although he supports himself by dealing in drinks,” Father Karol

Mikoszewski observed, referring to the Kingdom of Poland’s thousands of Jewish tavern keepers, “a Jewish drunk is hard to find.”

It was not always meant as a compliment. According to many Polish social reformers, Jewish tavern keepers only stayed sober in order to more effectively exploit their naive peasant customers, seeing to it that they ran up their tabs and became drunk enough to swindle. A peasant memoirist named Jan Slomka similarly described his neighbors spending hours in taverns “making themselves at home, taking their drink: while the [Jews] got more out of them, exploiting their weaknesses.” A peasant proverb warned ominously that “the peasant drinks at the inn and the Jew does him in.” Government officials used these suspicions about Jewish sobriety to justify their efforts to penalize, restrict, and ban Jewish participation in the lucrative liquor trade.

But the positive side to the stereotype probably outweighed the negative. The Polish nobles who actually owned the majority of taverns and distilleries were so convinced of Jewish sobriety that they all but refused to lease them to anyone else. Only Jews, they were conditioned to believe, could restrain themselves from drinking up the product. As a result, when the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian regimes that ruled the formerly Polish lands tried, in turn, to drive Jews out of the liquor trade, most nobles instructed their Jewish tavern keepers to prop up Christian bartenders as “fronts” and carry on business as usual. Over the course of the nineteenth century, officials and social reformers alike grumbled rather helplessly that “Jews everywhere” continually evaded Jewish-specific concessions and bans by hiring Christians to sell their liquor.

2. Karol Mikoszewski, Sermons on Drunkenness (Kazania o pijan´stwie, 1862), 63, 88–89.
3. For a sampling, see N. M. Gelber “She’elat ha-yehudim be-polin bi-shnat 1815–30,” Zion 15/14 (1949): 106–43.
7. Ostrowski, Pomyśły o potrzebie reformy, 102; Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (AGAD), Komisji Rządowej Spraw Wewnętrznych (KRSW) 6637, fol. 1; Władze Centralne Powstanie Listopadego 1830–31 (WCPL) 1830–31, 339, 26–28. This was also the explanation provided by the St. Petersburg Jewish Committee in 1858. AGAD, KRSW 6632, p. 57. According to the governor of Suwałki Province, the ban on the rural Jewish liquor trade that remained in place after 1862 should be lifted, since “Jews everywhere simply ignored it.”
A JEWISH DRUNK IS HARD TO FIND—DYNNER

From the Jewish perspective, maintaining an image of sobriety was thus critical for the continual awarding of tavern leases. In addition to this obvious economic advantage, however, the sobriety stereotype helped East European Jews sustain an internal sense of cultural superiority. No matter how marginalized or excluded, Jews could still compare themselves favorably to the daily spectacle of drunken gentile clientele presented in their taverns. Who can forget the pungent descriptions in some of the classics of Hebrew and Yiddish literature—H. N. Bialik’s father’s customers, who “sated themselves amid vomit, monstrous faces corrupted and tongues flowing with invectives” as Bialik imbibed whispered words of Torah from his father’s lips; or S. Y. Abramovitch’s “whole groups of country folk, some of them tottering on their legs, or already fallen; others keeping their feet, though by now on their fourth or fifth round,” in contrast to the “lively Jewish matron” seated behind the bar keeping track of everyone’s accounts. The popular song “Shiker iz der goy” (The gentile [goy] is drunk) provides the starkest formulation: “The goy goes to the tavern/ he drinks a glass of wine/ oy, the goy is drunk, drunk he is/ drink he must, because a goy is he,” the first verse proclaims. The next verse presents his mirror opposite: “The Jew goes to the studyhouse/ he looks at a book/ oy, the Jew is sober, sober is he/ learn he must, because a Jew is he.” East European Jews thus countered


8. While it is difficult to gauge the extent of Jewish tavern keeping, the available data suggest that at the beginning of the partition era (1772–1918) Jews leased approximately 85 percent of all taverns. There were, for example, 19,749 registered taverns in the Duchy of Warsaw in 1808 (the majority of which, 15,157, were in villages), while the official figure for Jewish tavern keeping closest to that date is 17,561 families. For the 1808 figures, see Henryk Grossman, “Struktura społeczna i zawodowa Ks. Warszawskiego,” Kwartalnik statystyczny (Warsaw, 1924), 35, table 12. For the 1814 figures, see AGAD, KRSW 1849, fol. 152–9. For Jewish population figures in 1810, see Bohdan Wasiutyński, Ludność żydowska w Polsce w wiekach XIX i XX (Warsaw, 1930), 8.


10. For the original Yiddish, and an alternate translation, see Mark Slobin, Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants (Champaign, Ill., 1996), 195. Alternate lyrics, in a version sung by Cantor Berel Chagy, are available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX0OKFWLOQU (last consulted on August 8, 2012). Bob Rothstein refutes this message by drawing attention to numerous Jewish drinking songs. See “Geyt a yid in shenkl arayn: Yiddish Songs
accusations of sinister sobriety with a demeaning stereotype of drunken gentile profligacy.

Certain internal Jewish observers questioned the Jewish part of this equation, drawing attention to members of Jewish society who had indeed succumbed to alcohol addiction. Tzevi Hirsch Kaidanover’s enormously popular mystical-ethical tract *Kav ba-yaḥar*, for example, complains of Jews drinking even during the earliest hours of the day: “I have noticed that many people in this region are so enslaved to their appetites that immediately upon awakening, hours before dawn, they believe they will die if they do not drink hard liquor.” When the time of morning prayer arrived their prayers were garbled, “a terrible sin . . . which many luminaries have committed.” Yet such rebukes appear but rarely in Jewish ethical literature in comparison to the manifold rebukes in Christian sermons, and Jewish clergy did not feel the need to form temperance societies as did their Christian counterparts. Alcoholism was clearly not a Jewish societal problem.

That being said, East European Jews did drink, and some drank in excess. Improvements in distilling, thanks to the importation of the Pistorius liquor still in the 1820s and the cultivation of potatoes, elevated the potency of drink fourfold while lowering the price of a drink dramatically. Levels of Jewish drinking, while remaining low relative to the societal norm, rose along with it over the course of the nineteenth century. This relative increase can be seen both in the emergence of what may have been Judaism’s most robust drinking culture in history, Hasidism, as well as in the individual cases of Jewish drunkenness appearing

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13. The main innovation of Pistorius was the still head, which was flattened and elongated to prevent the formation of bubbles when the vapor made contact with the liquid. See the excerpt by Sydney Young’s *Distillation Principles and Processes* (London, 1922), available at http://chestofbooks.com/science/chemistry/Distillation-Principles-And-Processes/Distillation-On-The-Manufacturing-Scale-Continued.html. Consulted on June 28, 2012.

in the thousands of petitions (kvitlekh) to Rabbi Elijah Guttmacher, the non-Hasidic “Tzaddik of Gratz” (Großzierek, 1796–1874). If such cases were not indicative of a societal problem, they do serve as a reminder that Jewish culture and drunkenness were by no means inimical. In fact, many cases of drunkenness described below betray an unmistakable Jewish inflection.

**Hasidic Drinking Culture in the Nineteenth-Century Kingdom of Poland**

It is perhaps most surprising that the sobriety stereotype managed to survive the rise of Hasidism, an explosively popular mystical movement whose members endorsed alcohol-induced, joyful modes of worship. Hasidic drinking practices were a favorite target among the movement’s opponents, who reviled Hasidim and their revered masters as drunks and thereby impugned their very Jewishness. Traditionalist opponents (mitnagdim) lambasted their customary “imbibing of wine and dancing, and in their dancing like rams, each man grabbing his neighbor’s neck, and chanting and singing, ‘The Rabbi ordered us to be joyful,’” practices that effectively differed little from those of the peasantry.\(^{15}\) Jewish proponents of Enlightenment-based reform (maskilim) penned satires ranging from more restrained parodies of Hasidism’s ritualized toasts (tikunim) to some of crudest, unrestrained satires in the history of Jewish literature.\(^{16}\) These portrayals may have been exaggerated, but they were not baseless. The tsadik Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810), for example, taught that those who have first completed the recitation of ten psalms known as the tikun ha-klali (general rectification) are then “elevated by means of their drinking.”\(^{17}\) A tradition in the name of the “Shpoler Zeyde” (1725–1812)

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explains that "when a man gives a cup of liquor to his friend to drink, it is true charity, for it seizes his heart and restores his spirit."18

The Jewish sobriety stereotype seems to have been sustainable throughout the rise of Hasidism because Hasidim confined the heaviest drinking to sacred times and spaces like the prayer house (shtibl) or the tsadik’s court. It is significant, for example, that when the maskil Abraham Stern reported in 1818 that Hasidim were accustomed to “drink, sing, and jump, which commonly lasts until midnight, and often throughout the entire night,” he referred to “clandestine meetings” marking the departure of the Sabbath.19 Similarly, the maskil Yehezkel Kotik claimed that Hasidim in his town “spent days and nights on end in the shtibl, dancing, singing, eating, and drinking, while their wives and children all but starved to death.”20 We get a toned-down picture when we turn to inner-Hasidic sources, but the locations of the drinking are still private and the occasions religious. Isaac Szmulewicz notes that everyone drank a toast at the conclusion of all-night sermons at the court of R. David of Lelov (Lelow) on the holiday of Shavuot.21 R. Simha Bunem of Pshyskha (Przysucha) recalls that when spending a Sabbath evening with the tsadik Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudilkov (Suzylkow) in the home of the latter’s patron, R. Moses "ordered his attendant to prepare him a big goblet of liquor for the night."22 Few non-Jews seem to have witnessed heavy Hasidic drinking, confined as it was to these spheres.

Non-Jews who did witness it could no longer harbor illusions about Jewish sobriety. British missionaries in the Kingdom of Poland who were able to gain access to Hasidic gatherings reported that “before their devotions [Hasidim] indulge freely in the use of mead, and even of ardent


19. Abraham Stern, “Information Concerning the Sect of the Hasidim,” AGAD, KR$\text{SW}$ 6634, pp. 239–43. Similarly, the 1845 memorandum by the entrepreneur Elias Moszkowski urged officials to put a stop to the “clandestine meetings” occurring in Hasidic prayer houses (shtiblekh) because “it is there that all debauchery, over-indulgence and drunkenness take place.” AGAD, CW$\text{W}$ 1456, pp. 215–33. Reprinted in Marcin Wodzinski, *Hasidism and Haskalah in the Kingdom of Poland* (London, 2005), 279–80.


spirits, to promote cheerfulness, as they regard sorrow and anxiety as particular hindrances to the enjoyment of union with God."²⁵ Police in the town of Parczew had to respond to noise complaints against Hasidim, who were playing drinking games and singing drinking songs in their prayer houses at all hours of night and then spilling out onto the Jewish street in boisterous song.²⁴ But such accounts are rare. Heavy Hasidic drinking was seldom on display before members of the rival culture, in stark contrast to the daily spectacle of Christian drinking occurring in the Jewish-run taverns.

CASES OF JEWISH ALCOHOLISM IN THE ELIJAH GUTTMACHER COLLECTION

Individual cases of Jewish alcoholism receive prominent mention in several Jewish memoir accounts,²⁵ but none are as painfully candid as the cases found scattered among the thousands of petitions (kvitlekh) to R. Elijah Guttmacher, the preeminent Jewish miracle worker in East Central Europe during the early 1870s. Safe in the knowledge that their disclosures were for R. Guttmacher’s eyes only, petitioners and their wives disclosed the devastating effects of habitual drinking on themselves and their families. Their stories constitute another important check on the sobriety stereotype.

Around 1932, ethnographic collectors (zamlers) discovered over seven thousand of such petitions to R. Guttmacher in an attic in Gratz (Grodzisk Wielkopolski) and delivered their precious haul to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, at that time located in Vilna. Some were brought to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem sometime before 1939, where they sit today; but the bulk of the collection remained in Vilna.

²³. Alexander McCaul, Sketches of Judaism and the Jews (London, 1838; originally published in British Magazine [1834]), 21). See also W. Ayerst, The Jews of the Nineteenth Century: A Collection of Essays, Reviews, and Historical Notices (London, 1847), 102, which reports that Hasidim drank mead on Friday afternoons “after the warm-bath (which is customary in Poland), with a view to their being in a cheerful frame of mind during evening prayers.”


²⁵. Solomon Maimon himself succumbed to chronic drinking during his stint as a village tutor: “Whiskey had to form my sole comfort; it made me forget all my misery.” See Maimon, An Autobiography, 145–46. Ezekiel Kotik mentions a Hasid named Yankel who was “always drunk as Lot;” and a Hasid named Israel who “started drinking, drowning his melancholy in the bitter drop” after the suppression of the 1863 uprising against the Tsar, to the point that it began to affect his health. Kotik, Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl, 363 and 208.
down to the Second World War. In 1942, the Nazi Einsatzstab Rosenberg\textsuperscript{26} recognized its value and transferred the Vilna collection to the NSDAP Institut Zur Erforschung der Judenfrage (Institute for Investigating the Jewish Question) in Frankfurt-am-Main, minus a small selection of letters that members of the Jewish “paper brigade” managed to conceal inside the Vilna Ghetto. In 1945, the U.S. Army recovered the collection and returned it to YIVO, now relocated to New York, along with the hidden portion.\textsuperscript{27}

These thousands of requests for prayers, blessings, advice, and remedies shed light on nearly every facet of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Some petitioners requested the tsadik’s heavenly intervention for the healing of disease, demonic possession, infertility, and sexual dysfunction. Others sought his advice in matchmaking, domestic disputes, and business. And some sought the tsadik’s help in putting an end to their or their husband’s chronic drinking (the vast majority of complaints about drunkenness concerned men).\textsuperscript{28} Such petitions bring us into the world of Jewish drunks and their long-suffering families, drawing our attention to a problem that was as hushed up as any other societal taboo. Often the associated afflictions differed little from alcoholism-related problems in the general society: poor health, impoverishment, domestic abuse, and so on. Yet many cases of Jewish alcoholism bear the imprint of their Jewish context.

Jacob Simon ben Rebeccah began drowning his sorrows after he was outbid on a lease in his village, most likely a tavern:

Jacob Simon ben Rebeccah for livelihood (parnasa), that God, may he be blessed, will quickly send him business so that he can support his wife and small children. For until now, he derived meager bread from a small lease (arenda) that was up for renewal. And now someone came and appropriated their livelihood by increasing the lease amount. “And he is like a ship in the sea, ‘and there was a mighty tempest in the sea

\textsuperscript{26.} Operational Staff Rosenberg, an organization established by Alfred Rosenberg for the systematic plunder of the art and cultural objects belonging to Jews in Europe.

\textsuperscript{27.} A small sample of correspondence (not kvitlkh) related to American Jewish immigrant life was published and analyzed by Zalman Reizen, in “Briv fun Amerika tzum Groiditzer Tzaddik,” YIVO Bletter, Yerbukh fun amonipteyl (1939, vol. 2), 191–218.

\textsuperscript{28.} Only one Guttmacher petition relates to a woman’s drinking problem: Alon ben Nohah asked that “God’s hand reverse the heart of his wife, that she not become drunk. For she always drinks hard liquor.” YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 215. Village of Poczynsaki [probably Hoczynski].
so that the ship seemed likely to be wrecked [Jonah 1.4]” if God does not have mercy and if the respected the Admor [Adonenu, Morenu, ve-Rabenu] does not arouse God’s mercy so that he will now get another lease so that he can support himself. And for the prosperity of his body, for he is accustomed to cheer himself with cases of liquor. And he became ill from this with a dangerous weakness of the heart, may he have a speedy recovery.29

The former lease holder was aware that excessive drinking contributed to his dangerous heart condition, expressing his sense of helplessness through his deft control of Hebrew scriptural verses. Only the tsadik’s divine intervention, he seemed to believe, could restore his health and livelihood.30

Not surprisingly, Jewish drunkenness bred domestic quarrels, physical abuse, and other common effects of alcoholism. What was different, however, was the degree of shame such behavior engendered in a society that invoked this vice to deligitimize the dominant culture.31 The wife of Abraham Moshe ben Hayya Sarah, who was “grandson of the genius rabbi the Hasid Rabbi Rabbienu Yaakov,” for example, complained that her husband “made a lot of money as an agent, but not always in a kosher manner: once in the game of cards and once in drunkenness, God forbid.” She implored R. Guttmacher to “remove the shame from him and let him walk in the right path.”32 Tsirel bat Esther complained that her husband Berish ben Rekhel “quarrels with her, for he is a bad man (ish beliel) and a drunk,” implicitly associating drunkenness and immorality.33 Occasionally one finds deep contrition on the part of alcohol-dependent husbands and fathers. Solomon ben Reizel admitted that he “drinks a lot of liquor to the point it makes him drunk, and because of this he has no domestic tranquility.” He asked God to “have mercy on him and guard him so that he doesn’t drink anymore.”34 Isaac Eizik ben Rachel, a widower who “drinks more liquor than he needs, and so he beats his children,”

30. Sarah bat Rachel was similarly worried that her husband’s drinking was endangering his health, for he “drinks and is always drunk . . . and had enjoyed longevity but has declined further and further as a result of this.” YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 198. Warta II.
31. On these value differences, see especially Daniel Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man (Berkeley, Calif., 1997), chap. 1.
33. YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 766. Chrzanow.
34. YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 847. Sieradz.
implored R. Guttmacher to “prescribe a cure for this.” Such moments reveal a genuine sense of regret among quarrelsome and abusive drinkers with whom we are usually disinclined to empathize.\textsuperscript{35}

The antidote for Jewish drunkenness was Torah study and prayer. If one did not study and pray very much oneself, then perhaps R. Guttmacher’s own Torah knowledge and prayers could effect a transformation:

Sarah bat Leah, her husband Moshe ben Reizel. Her request is for peace between husband and wife, for her aforementioned husband is always drunk, and he comes home and quarrels with his aforementioned wife. And he causes damages and [financial] losses, and she has no rest when he comes home. And he also hit his eldest son for nothing. So the aforementioned woman requests that the High and Exalted One, by virtue of the semblance of his holy Torah knowledge, request mercy for her and her husband, that a different spirit will enter his heart for good, and that he will never again get drunk for the rest of his life, and that there will be peace between him and his wife and aforementioned son and all their children.\textsuperscript{36}

Nowhere does Sarah express a desire for a divorce (\textit{get}). She rather hopes that the tsadik’s divine intercession, effective because of his learning, will cause the husband to lose his desire to get drunk.

Many wives of alcoholics appear to have had little choice but to become the economic backbone of the family. Not surprisingly, in a culture that still conceived of marriage as an economic (in addition to a religious and procreative) arrangement, some wives attempted to rid themselves of their economic dead weight through divorce. Such scenarios were also culturally specific, since much of the society throughout the Polish lands complied with Catholic prohibitions against divorce. And as Jewish women tended to work at much higher rates than other East European women, they were in a much better position to provide for themselves and their families after the termination of the marriage. While the salient literary image of the working Jewish woman as enabler of her husband’s Torah studies has been shown in recent studies to have been more an abstract ideal than a reality, the Polish Jewish wife does appear to have been a kind of junior partner in a couple’s joint economic venture—for example, she would serve the customers while he would deal

\textsuperscript{35} YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 824. Remblielice village n. Dzialoszyn.

\textsuperscript{36} YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 726. Kutno (Kutna) 1.
with suppliers, production, and the nobleman who owned a leased enterprise such as a tavern. This working experience removed an important obstacle to divorce.

Obtaining a divorce was, to be sure, complicated, not least because rabbinical interpretations of Jewish law made it difficult for women to initiate divorces. Satisfying the financial stipulations of a divorce could be daunting too, especially for women who were their families’ sole breadwinners. Sarah bat Feiga singlehandedly ran a tavern and was a partner in a kosher slaughtering enterprise, but neither was sufficient for the support of her household. Sarah also had to scrape together a dowry for her daughter Miriam, who had been betrothed for a whole year. Time was running out, because the wedding was approaching and the groom had been drafted into the tsarist army and would serve the following year. Sarah, a former widow, sorely regretted marrying her current husband because “he is a hard drinking man and his favorite thing is to play cards and other such things. And he did not put any effort towards maintaining the household.” So she divorced him through the rabbinical court, an indication that female-initiated divorces were effectively possible within a traditional framework. But under the terms of the suit she was required to pay a sum of 105 rubles to her husband. Sarah had not yet paid him because “there is no place from which to collect that sum. And now he wanders from place to place, and I must provide his meals.” Freeing herself from her drunken husband came at a high price.

Hena bat Yuta had divorced her alcoholic husband ten years earlier, but she too now found herself in a predicament. Providing one of the rare indications of the inroads of modernity in the Guttmacher collection, Hena explained that “she was divorced from her husband at a time when he was a drunk, and the rabbi who granted the get was one of the new-style doctors, owing to our many sins.” Apparently, the couple had been part of a growing number of acculturated Polish Jews in larger cities attracted to the Polish analog to Reform Judaism. But both seem to have reverted to traditional rabbinic authority: “And he wants to marry
her again,” Hena explained to R. Guttmacher, “and claims that the get was not according to religious requirements, for he was drunk at the time.”41 Hena’s ex-husband now claimed to be zealously concerned about the ritual legal ramifications of his intoxicated state.

As Jewish piety and status were based not only on ritual observance but also on one’s perceived dedication to Torah study, and as it was hard to study when drunk, several wives of Jewish alcoholics were devastated to report that their scholarly husbands had abandoned their studies. Liba bat Zela implored the tsadik to “turn his heart to good, so that he no longer will be a drunkard.” Her husband had been a drunkard for several years, “his livelihood practically has left him,” and their household was now “without bread.” What was even more tragic, however, was that before his slide into alcohol dependency “he was a student of Torah and walked in the ways of God.” Her petition ends with requests for blessings for each of their five children, one of whom, she adds, had to quit school because the family could no longer afford to pay his tuition.42

Drinking-induced lapses in piety were particularly harmful for those whose occupations depended on a reputation for piety. An anonymous kosher butcher had to give up his occupation, or at least the kosher part of it, because, as he puts it, “an obstacle emerged from under his own hand, which gave him glasses of wine.” He had now “abandoned that path completely and swore that he will never drink any drink of drunkenness. And it’s been several years and these drinks never touched his lips. And he wants to return to his craft, and ‘the eyes of Israel are upon him’ [1 Kgs 1.20] and upon the Upper Holiness.” He planned “to appear before the rabbinical court of this town” to ask to be reinstated as a kosher butcher and asked R. Guttmacher to ensure that the rabbinical court would be understanding.43

One chronic drinker nearly converted to Christianity. A shoemaker named Joshua Zelig ben Reizel, who according to his wife was scholarly and from a good family, had lost a court case and, “because of his heaviness of heart, he became a drunk and constantly indulged in drink, and last year he was with the priests in Krakow for several days and wanted to convert, God forbid.” Joshua had decided against conversion in the end, but he had recently lost an appeal in the case and had returned to

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41. YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 880. No location.
42. YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 435. Lodz 9.
hard drinking. It is not clear to what extent Joshua was merely using his drinking problems to excuse his near conversion, but it seems reasonable to assume that a Jew who was dependent on alcohol and reduced to destitution would have been quite open to persuasion.

GAUGING EAST EUROPEAN JEWISH DRINKING NORMS

The Guttmacher petitions constitute deeply personal confessions by Jewish alcoholics and their spouses. But they represent extreme cases. As a rule, Jews tended to make the arduous journey to R. Guttmacher and other miracle workers when they found themselves in situations of deep distress. A more normative read on Jewish drinking habits is afforded in prescriptive literature, such as ethical treatises, rabbinic sermons, and legal commentaries. While such literature tends to reflect societal ideals and aspirations, its directives often respond to the perceived social reality.

A particularly useful type of source is rabbinic commentaries on blessings over food. One such code acknowledges rather casually that “in these lands” Jews are accustomed to drink liquor before, during, and after their meals. There was only disagreement among ritual experts over whether it requires a separate blessing. Another useful source is rabbinic discussions about the ritual practice of substituting liquor for wine when making the Sabbath morning blessing. The widespread practice was rationalized by noting the considerable expense of wine in Poland-Lithuania, a non-wine-producing region, as well as the perception that “the majority of the masses in those countries drink liquor on a daily basis” and effectively treated liquor like the “wine of the land” (be’mer medinah).

The sense we get from prescriptions like these is that East European Jews drank moderately enough in comparison to their non-Jewish neighbors, but drink they did—and a great deal more than is customary in America or Israel today. This sense is reinforced by the barely concealed expressions of shock and disapproval in contemporary American and

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44. YIVO, RG 27, Elijah Guttmacher Collection, 774. Chrzanow 2.
45. According to the authors, there is no need to make a blessing over liquor drunk during one’s meal “in order to arouse his appetite,” nor over liquor drunk during the meal when the purpose is to “warm his stomach to digest the meal”; but in the latter case one should wait until after the blessing after the meal as a precaution. Shlomo Zalman Lifshitz and Isaac of Warka, Lekute shoobanim (Lublin, 1883), Hayyim Yeshayahu Hakohen, ed., 1:6–7.
Israeli Hasidic commentaries when noting the drinking practices of their East European predecessors, including renowned tsadikim. The encoding of drinking in Polish Jewish culture—i.e., its confinement to sacred occasions and spaces—may be understood as an appropriation and domesticization of a practice that had been negatively associated with the dominant culture. It remained moderate relative to the epidemic proportions of nineteenth-century Polish Christian drunkenness. But Jewish drunks were really not so hard to find.

47. See, for example, Frankel, Avraham Hayyim ben Naftali Tzevi, *Shabat bet ropbita* (Jerusalem, 1994), 469, quoting Isaac Ze’ev Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rov (1886–1959): As great tsadikim were known to have made the Sabbath morning blessing over liquor, no one should “dare to second guess them, God forbid.” Yet it is only appropriate for “one who is accustomed to drinking hard liquor every morning, and a small cup of hard liquor is pleasing and delicious for him before his breakfast.” The commentator himself confesses that he personally does not enjoy hard liquor at all, nor even the effects of wine, but prefers to make his blessings over grape juice (*grayp jow*).