

ABSTRACT

THE TRADITIONAL YIDDISH LULLABY
AS AN EAST-ASHKENAZI PHENOMENON

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Traditional lullabies comprise the most widespread repertoire of Yiddish functional songs. The traditional corpus was most likely consolidated during the eighteenth century at the latest, and despite its dissemination throughout Eastern Europe, it comprised only a handful of textual formulas and a dozen melodies. In some aspects traditional Yiddish lullabies resemble Eastern Slavic ones, and yet several prominent characteristics distinguish the Jewish repertoire from neighboring counterparts. These are the dominance of the music over the words, clear affinity to the Ashkenazi-German heritage, and a circumscribed set of functions. By virtue of its poetic and musical specificity, the traditional Yiddish lullaby became emblematic of East European Jewry in the eyes of *maskilim* already in the second half of the nineteenth century, concomitantly with the rise of modern Jewish national consciousness. In that period, songs of literary origin seeped into the folkloric repertoire.

While resonating with traditional patterns, these newer songs reflected contemporary fashions, in poetry as well as music. Thus, even folklorized lullabies of literary origin bore a recognizable ideological function and targeted enlightened Jews, in that their phraseology and imagery conveyed either socialist messages or the ideals of the proto-Zionist movement *Hibbat Zion* [Love of Zion]. Indeed, during the twentieth century, many of these new Yiddish lullabies were translated into Hebrew, becoming folk songs in turn. Traditional lullabies, however, remained different: their addressee was still the baby, and their words and tunes served the three traditional functions of the genre in Jewish society – soothing, safeguarding, and initiation.