

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Left: Illustrated lotto playing board printed in Vilna, 1922; Below: Uri Zvi Before the Cross, published in the literary journal *Albatros*, Warsaw, 1922

to Jews. For example, some respondents explained that on Christmas one must cover any vessel containing liquid with a piece of iron, lest the liquid become tainted with Jesus's blood. Others explained that men and boys refrained from studying Jewish sacred texts and instead remained inside with the windows shuttered, playing games similar to those played at Hanukkah. This ensured that Christ, who was thought to fly through the skies on Christmas (a belief particularly noted in responses from Poland and Romania), would not be able to desecrate any holy book by hiding inside it or defecating on the pages.

However, not all forms of reading were avoided at Christmas. Another folk custom surrounding the holiday was the recitation of *Toldos Yeshu*, a satirical counter-narrative to the foundational story of Christianity, portraying Jesus's birth as illegitimate and the wonders he performed as the work of a charlatan magician. Originating in late-antiquity or the early medieval period, extant versions of the narrative exist in Aramaic, Hebrew, Judeo-Persian, Arabic, Yiddish and Ladino.

Despite the aversion to Christ exemplified in these customs, many Yiddish artists and writers engaged with Christian themes. Marc Chagall used the image of Jesus on the cross in a number of his paintings – sometimes draped in a tallis, sometimes wearing tefillin, and often juxtaposed with scenes of pogroms and war. Yiddish and Hebrew poet Uri Zvi Greenberg's 1922 poem, *Uri Zvi Before the Cross*, presents Jesus as a stagnant icon unable to understand Jewish suffering and is set typographically in the shape of a cross.

Perhaps the most controversial piece of Yiddish literature drawing from the life of Jesus was Sholem Asch's 1939 novel, *The Nazarene*, the first book in a trilogy exploring Christian themes (*The Apostle*, 1943; and *Mary*, 1949). Many in the Yiddish-speaking community took umbrage with the sympathetic portrayal of Jesus in Asch's work. Regardless, the book's English translation sold two million copies during its first two years of publication, a perfect embodiment of the often complicated relationship Jewish communities around the world have with Christianity. ■

Stefanie Halpern is the director of YIVO's archives. See yivo.org

WE WISH YOU A MERRY NITL

In the 1920s, a series of questionnaires revealed how Jews in Eastern Europe observed Hanukkah – and Christmas. **Stefanie Halpern** uncovers some surprising seasonal traditions

Between 1926 and 1927, YIVO's Ethnographic Committee in Vilna released a series of questionnaires relating to holiday observance among Eastern European Jews. These questionnaires were distributed throughout cities, towns and villages to collect and preserve folk customs surrounding the major festivals, as well as holidays whose rituals are not mandated by the Torah.

The questionnaire distributed in January 1927, for example, was concerned with the music, games and foods specific to Hanukkah. The festival was the only holiday where game-playing was encouraged, and one popular practice was to try to solve increasingly difficult riddles. Card-playing was popular across communities in the region and decks were known by various names, including *kleyn shas* (small Talmud) or *kvitlekh* (little pieces of paper). Most decks consisted of 31 brightly-coloured

cards, often homemade, which were decorated with Hebrew letters (which stood for numbers), everyday objects and portraits of biblical figures.

Special foods were also prepared on Hanukkah. On the Sabbath that fell during the holiday, for example, a roast goose or duck would be prepared. Some of the *shmaltz* (fat) from the bird would be used for frying latkes and the rest was reserved for use during Passover. In Hungary, foods prepared with an abundance of garlic, including fried bread and stews, were also standard Hanukkah fare, the pungent odour a potential safeguard against anti-Jewish violence.

An unexpected addition to the questionnaires was a section on the ways in which Jews observed Christmas, more commonly referred to as 'nidl' in Yiddish. Many of the practices attested to seem to provide a sort of ritual protection against imagined threats posed

