Some twenty years ago I was invited to speak about two Yiddish children’s books, which I had translated, at the Jewish book fair held annually since the early 1950s at the Jewish Community Center of Detroit, Michigan. My host told me that the planners of the book fair were especially eager to have events for children, because they thought it was important to teach children to buy Jewish books. Parents would send their children to the book fair with money so that they would themselves have the experience of buying Jewish books. What struck me at that time was that my host kept talking about buying Jewish books—not reading them. The two are distinct activities, after all: one can read books without buying them (a service provided by lending libraries), and of course one can buy a book and never read it. Why, then, this discussion about teaching children to buy Jewish books, instead of—or at least in addition to—reading them?

At the time, I thought this did not reflect all that well on the community. They were placing too much value on books as commodities and not enough on what one can gain, independent of ownership, from the contents of books. On reflection, though, I see something else: an attention to the act of buying books as being in itself of cultural significance for this Jewish community. Teaching children to buy Jewish books meant socializing them into practices important to the adults raising them: the act of owning Jewish things and displaying them in the home; the value of books as collectibles, having a material worth independent of the importance of their contents; the importance of buying books not only to own them but also to give them as gifts, as part of the communal practice of gift exchange. (Note that in the United States, Jewish book fairs, including this one, typically take place during November, which has been proclaimed Jewish Book Month by the Jewish Book Council. This is doubtless, at least in part, because November comes right before Chanukkah, which has been the Jewish gift-giving occasion par excellence in America since at least the mid-twentieth century). Moreover, buying Jewish books at
the Jewish Community Center constituted an opportunity for communal engagement and an act of support for the community. For the Jews of Detroit—and in this sense they are very typical of American Jews—buying a Jewish book is an act of what has been termed “symbolic consumption.”¹

Consumer practices are integral to Jewish culture, and yet they are easily overlooked or disparaged in relation to more readily recognized Jewish cultural practices, such as prayer, scholarship, communal organization, political action, and philanthropy. This is even the case when studying American Jewry, where these practices have been developed and certainly have been discussed most elaborately, as historian Andrew Heinze noted in *Adapting to Abundance*, his 1990 book on the subject of early twentieth-century immigrant Jewish consumerism. Heinze argues that “If the American people has been characterized by a peculiar faith in the principle of a rising standard of living, then the adaptation of immigrants to the ‘perspective of abundance’ must be considered an essential part of Americanization.” He sees immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe as doubly exemplary of this principle: “As consumers, Jews sought important elements of American identity more quickly and thoroughly than other groups of newcomers. As entrepreneurs in consumer-oriented trade, they, more than others, enriched the potent environment of urban consumption which had become such a distinctive feature of American society.” And yet, Heinze states, attention to consumerism runs counter to prevailing historical narratives in America, where “the quest for what is noble in the heritage of American immigration has yielded a...history, in which people appear as vital producers.... As consumers, however, immigrants have been rendered almost faceless.” He suggests that this both “reflects a general tendency among scholars to consider production, the use of capital and labor, as the basis of social relationships” and is rooted in a bias that “reflects a subtle moral attitude toward production [vs.] consumption.”²