

GUEST ESSAY

Yiddish Is Having a Moment

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For a language without a physical address that has come frighteningly close to extinction, Yiddish’s will to live seems inexhaustible. The lesson is simple and straightforward: Survival is an act of stubbornness.

Yiddish has been experiencing something of a revival. Online courses mean that anyone from Buenos Aires to Melbourne might learn to speak it. There are new translations of long-forgotten works and literary classics. A Broadway staging of “Fiddler on the Roof” was performed in Yiddish. And streaming platforms like Netflix have released series, including “Shtisel,” “Unorthodox” and “Rough Diamonds,” fully or partially in Yiddish.

Before World War II, approximately 13 million Jews, both secular and religious, spoke Yiddish. Today it is estimated that there are about a quarter of a million speakers in the United States, about the same number in Israel and roughly another 100,000 in the rest of the world. Nowadays the vast majority of those who speak the language are ultra-Orthodox. They aren’t multilingual, as secular Yiddish speakers always were.

I was born and raised in Mexico City, speaking Yiddish and Spanish. Whereas the part of my extended family who fled to New York and Chicago lost Yiddish along the way, Mexican Jews remained more in the community, continuing to use the language even as they remained secular.

It’s worth noting that Yiddish has been maligned by gentiles and Jews alike. Antisemites considered it the parlance of vermin, while the rabbinical elite deemed it unworthy of serious Talmudic discussion. As the saying goes, better an honest slap in the face than an insincere kiss. I like to think that animosity has helped the language to be nimble, clearheaded and improvisational.

Yiddish came to life at least a millennium ago. The earliest historical documents we have date back to the 12th century in the Rhineland in western Germany as a code-switching form of communication — called *loshn ashkenaz*, the language of Ashkenaz — juxtaposing High German and Hebrew. There is a scholarly theory that posits that the combination was actually High German and Aramaic, which was used by Middle Eastern Jews. At any rate, Yiddish was the tongue of women, children and the illiterate.

By the time the Italian poet Dante Alighieri composed “The Divine Comedy,” the “jargon,” as it was derided, had attained political, economic and cultural power, giving Eastern European Jews a sense of interconnectedness. While it is true that Shakespeare didn’t imagine Shylock to be a Yiddish speaker, it’s likely that Jewish merchants like him would at least have heard about *di mame loshn*, the mother tongue.

During the Enlightenment, secularists, called *Maskilim*, depicted Yiddish as a contorted language, incapable of “civilized” thought. In their view, to be a full-fledged European citizen one needed to speak the languages of Goethe, Locke and Voltaire. On the other hand, Hasidism, a religious movement that at the beginning was against the rabbinical

establishment, thrived in Yiddish.

The superb stories of its founder, the Baal Shem Tov, and his descendants, including Rabbi Nakhman of Bratslev, his great-grandson, were, for the most part, disseminated in Yiddish. Rabbi Nakhman is considered a forerunner of Franz Kafka's worldview on fate as being shaped by obscure, mysterious, perhaps divine drive. Fittingly, Kafka studied the language and in 1912 even delivered a speech in Yiddish.

The embrace of secularism is best represented by the Yiddish literary output of the 19th century, including the most beloved of Yiddish writers, Sholom Aleichem, the author of "Tevye the Dairyman," a story about a shtetl dweller whose life is redefined by secularization, politics, antisemitism and immigration. As in the case of Tevye, Yiddish was the lingua franca of Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Lithuanian and other Jews, allowing them to have a neutral meeting ground while inhabiting the same stateless culture.

My paternal grandmother, originally from Brodno, a neighborhood in Warsaw, spoke Yiddish with her family and Polish and Russian with the gentiles. That universality has served Yiddish. Eliezer Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto and a native Yiddish speaker, modeled his constructed language as an "auxiliary," or a second language, an approach that would allow people to put away their differences without losing their individuality. Yiddish was already doing that for Ashkenazi Jews.

Another enemy of Yiddish was Zionism. In the late 19th century, as the hope for a Jewish state found its ground, it was portrayed as jargon spoken by the diaspora — the language of homelessness, without a true national voice. To combat this deficit, Hebrew needed to be revived. Soon the myth sprung of the Hebrew pioneer, in sharp contrast with the large-nosed, hunchbacked Jew that Zionists themselves vilified.

Hebrew, which officially became the national language of the state of Israel in 1948, is spoken by about nine million people around the world. For some, the language symbolizes far-right Israeli militarism.

In contrast, Yiddish represents exile — a longing for home. It was the backbone of the Jewish labor movement in the United States, and the feminist Emma Goldman championed women's equality and free love in Yiddish. Abraham Cahan, the feisty, commanding editor in chief of *Forverts* — *The Forward*, the left-leaning Yiddish daily in New York at the turn of the century — saw the language as a tool for educating Jewish immigrants about their rights.

Given everything Yiddish has gone through — how it was a tool of cross-border continuity, how it was pushed to the crematories by the Nazis, how after the Shoah it thrived in some diasporas but was pushed aside in others — its sheer endurance is nothing short of miraculous.

Yet nostalgia alone cannot push a revival beyond its narrow means. It continues to be a language without a homeland, without an army, a flag, a post office or a central bank, the language of a small, dispersed people. Its speakers may be few, but as my maternal grandmother used to say, words should be weighted, not counted.

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