

YIDDISH

A NATION OF WORDS

Miriam Weinstein

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און ווי דער אוראלטער קערנדל
וואס האט זיך פארוואנדלט אין זאנג-
וועלן די ווערטער אויך נעהרן,
וועלן די ווערטער געהערן
דעם פאלק, אין זיין אייביגן גאנג.

Un vi der uralter kerndel
Vos hot zikh farvandlt in zang —
Vein di verter oykh nern,
Vein di verter gehern
Dem folk, in zayn eybign gang.

And like the ancient kernel
that transformed itself in the stalk —
the words will also nourish,
the words which belong
to the people, on their eternal journey.

Abraham Sutzkever

For Peter, Eli, and Mirka —
my own personal golden chain.

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Timeline

ca. 900–1000	Beginnings of Yiddish
1272	Worms <i>mahzor</i>
ca. 1680	<i>Tsenerene</i>
1772–1815	Partition of Poland
1829	Tsar Nicholas I designates the Pale of Settlement
1862	First Yiddish newspaper
1864	Mendele's first story published
1881	Sholem Aleichem begins publishing in Yiddish
1881	Assassination of Tsar Alexander II
1881	Abraham Cahan moves to New York
1881	Eliezer Ben Yehuda moves to Palestine
1897	<i>Forward</i> founded
1897	Bund organized
1897	First Zionist Congress
1908	Czernowitz conference
1911–14	Shimon An-ski's ethnographic expedition
1918	Treaty of Versailles
1925	YIVO founded
1928	Birobidzhan established
1939–45	World War II
1948	State of Israel born
	Isaac Bashevis Singer wins Nobel Prize for
1978	Literature

1979 National Yiddish Book Center founded

Cast of Characters

1040–1105	Rashi
1700–1760	Ba'al Shem Tov
1729–86	Moses Mendelssohn
1772–1811	Nakhman of Bratslav
1835–1917	Mendele Moykher Sforim
1851–1915	Yitzak Leib Peretz
1858–1922	Eliezer Ben Yehuda
1859–1916	Sholem Aleichem
1860–1951	Abraham Cahan
1860–1941	Simon Dubnow
1863–1928	Shimon An-ski
1864–1937	Nathan Birnbaum
1865–1943	Chaim Zhitlovski
1880–1943	Esther Frumkin
1893–1943	Israel Joshua Singer
1894–1969	Max Weinreich
1895–1952	Peretz Markish
1900–1944	Emanuel Ringelblum
1904–91	Isaac Bashevis Singer
1913–	Abraham Sutzkever
1955–	Aaron Lansky

A Note on Yiddish Spelling

The careful reader will find that on occasion the same Yiddish word may be spelled in more than one way. Wherever possible, I have transliterated and spelled Yiddish according to the YIVO standard, which is very clear and makes for easy pronunciation. (Just loosen up your throat and go for the guttural in the *kh*.)

When quoting material that was originally translated by others, however, I have retained earlier spelling. Just as we are aware of Shakespeare's spelling being different from our own, or the way we notice that our British contemporaries use "theatre" where we Americans write "theater," the varieties of Yiddish orthography have their own story to tell. I hope that readers will see this as part of the larger tale.

Talking Jewish

יא, גאט, מיר זיינען דיין אויסדערוויילט פאלק, אבער פארוואס האסטו
אונדז געדארפט אויסוואלן?

Yo, got, mir zinen dayn oysdervaylt folk, ober farvos hostu undz gedarft oysvaln?

Yes, God, we are your chosen people. But why did you have to choose us?

My parents loved to travel. They were not rich people, but in the years after World War II they would leave our Bronx apartment and head off on vacations, first to Europe, and then little by little to almost every continent. They visited big famous cities and dusty crossroads towns. Often, they would return telling a variant of a familiar tale: “There we were, in this little shop in ...” (fill in the blank: Dublin, Johannesburg, Tashkent). “I don’t know; somehow I got the idea.” (From what? A tilt of the head? A look in the eyes?) “So I says to him, ‘*Vus makhst?*’ ” (what’s doing). “And this guy who, two minutes before, wouldn’t give us the time of day becomes all of a sudden our buddy, our friend. He invites us home, shows us around the whole neighborhood, a regular *landsmen*” (fellow countryman).

For a thousand years, this was the standard Jewish story. Yiddish was the secret handshake, the golden key. It was the language that defined a world and a people. *Yiddish* means “Jewish.” Its words were, simply, the sound of Jewish life.

Babies were born into rooms full of women crooning in Yiddish; corpses were washed and prepared to the sounds of Yiddish grief. For a people without a country, without a government, without protection of any dependable kind, language became a powerful glue. It connected European Jews to each other even as it separated them from their neighbors — people among whom they may have lived for hundreds of years. It also linked them to their past through their sacred language, Hebrew.

Because it was so easy for words and phrases from the Hebrew prayers they recited every day to slip into their ordinary Yiddish speech, their place in “Jewish time” was confirmed, from the beginning of the world until the coming of the Messiah and the End of Days. It allowed them to live outside Christian or secular history and keep their vision of peoplehood alive. In the meantime, when they wandered in the real, here-and-now world, it was their

passport and amulet. It was their strength.

The tale my parents told on a dozen returns is hardly heard anymore. These days, unless your travels are circumscribed — retirement homes, Holocaust museums, Hasidic enclaves of Brooklyn or Jerusalem — you will not hear Yiddish in the shop or the street, the synagogue or the house. That is not to say that a few words of it aren't sprinkled through English, like raisins in rugelach. Politicians have chutzpah, TV personalities kibbitz, Americans of all ethnic backgrounds have learned to slap their hands on their hips and demand, singsong, "So what does that make me, chopped liver?" But as a living language, Yiddish barely qualifies. It is a speech system that is faltering, even on life support. (With one big exception: the ultra-Orthodox. Their astounding fecundity, history's latest surprise, may change the epilogue but does not alter the bulk of the tale.)

So how did it happen? How did a language that cursed and crooned for a thousand years fade in the course of one little lifetime? What could have happened to its self-contained world? (*Better a Jew without a beard than a beard without a Jew* would be the appropriate Yiddish proverb here.) And why was the tongue itself perhaps *einстик*, unique, in the history of languages? (Yes, I know that is an enormous claim.)

When my parents were born, in the early years of the twentieth century, something like eight million souls called Yiddish *mame loshn*, mother tongue. Their world was bursting with Yiddish schools offering competing political philosophies, newspapers on every side of every burning issue, plays that ranged from melodramas like Isaac Zolatorevsky's *Money, Love, and Shame* to significant dramatic works like Jacob Gordin's *Jewish King Lear* or Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance*. It had journals of every stripe, thousands of book titles in print. Radio broadcasting and an international film industry developed as technologies grew.

By the time my parents died three-quarters of a century later, Yiddish books were being thrown out wholesale in trash cans and Dumpsters. New York's great newspaper the *Forverts (Daily Forward)*, which had outlived competitor after competitor, was reduced to a weekly written by people who, in more commodious times, would never have been caught dead sharing the same page. Not only did my parents' grandchildren not know the Yiddish language, but even the Hebrew they learned in Hebrew school had been systematically cleansed of the Yiddish pronunciation that had been ubiquitous in my parents' youth, and in mine.

But the object of this book is not breast-beating for the good old days of yore, when there was singing every *shabes*, Sabbath, chicken soup in every pot. The object, as any self-respecting *yid*, Jew, would know, is to strengthen the golden chain of continuity.

To that end, I have written history-as-story, filling the tale with flesh-and-blood people with obsessive humor, visionary courage, brilliant desperate causes, and glorious flaws. As will immediately be obvious, I am a journalist, not a historian, linguist, or any kind of scholar. I did my research — meeting

mavens, experts; working my way through lights-on-timers library stacks — as a *yederer*, an everyman.

What I soon learned was that no language has been so adored, so despised, so ostentatiously ignored. Aaron Lansky, the book rescuer who invented the midnight Dumpster run, estimates that out of thirty-five thousand different Yiddish titles that have been published, only 0.5 percent have been translated into English. We won't even go into the number of folk tunes, music hall ditties, and poignant poems of labor or love that are known only to the Yiddish-speaking few.

So this is a story that begs to be told. The last book that chronicled the Yiddish language was a four-volume history written in Yiddish during and after World War II by the brilliant scholar Max Weinreich. Two volumes have been translated into English. They are heavy going. In the 1960s and 1970s Leo Rosten wrote marvelously funny books describing the way that Yiddish was used at the time, but they assumed some Yiddish or Jewish background or inclination.

This book requires nothing more than an open heart and a curious mind. Well, maybe also a certain flexibility with regard to spelling. Standardized Yiddish orthography was not even invented until 1936 and has been adopted, grudgingly, only in the last several years. Then there is the matter of standardized transliteration. (If you don't know what that means, don't worry, you'll learn.) Although I have tried to use it where possible, I have sometimes substituted more familiar versions, like the common rendition of Chanukah instead of the more correct *khanike*. I have tried to strike a middle ground between foreignness and flavor. Readers will learn how, for a language that has been roundly maligned and famously praised, even spelling proclaims a writer's political, religious, and cultural stance.

For me, this tale qualifies as a miracle. A language is born in shadow with the lowliest of aims — only for women, only for the untutored, only for ordinary, workaday use. Yet that very dailiness and lack of expectation allow it to grow. It expands, sweet and light as a New Year's honey cake, pulses with life for a thousand years. It links its people to their illustrious past. It has the world's best sense of humor, unable to resist the virtuoso joke even in the curse. (*May you turn into a blintz, and may your enemy turn into a cat, and may he eat you up and choke on you, so we can be rid of you both.*) It gets discovered by a generation of intellectuals and politicians. Time and again the highbrow thinks he will just use Yiddish to lure the uneducated masses to listen to him expound his brilliant ideas. And time and again it is he who does the listening and learning, in thrall to the language and to its folk.

Then, just when this poor no-account tongue goes into creative overdrive, winning a crumb of respect and even hope for a bit of glory, it all disappears. Holocaust, assimilation, executions, displacement, language police, and then, incredibly, stone silence. One brief moment of flame, a *pintele yid*, a spark of Jewishness, burns and then sputters. A few thousand folk songs, a few hundred ways of parsing the fine points of human behavior — *shnuk*, *shlemiel*,

shlimazl — and those thirty-five thousand different books.

But even in dying, this most practical of tongues has a job to do: It allows Hebrew, the ancient, holy, pre-Yiddish tongue, to be reborn. Yiddish gives up its life for its parent/child. What could be more Jewish-motherish, more *hartsik*, caring, than that?

One staple Yiddish Hasidic tale concerns a poor bedraggled beggar who shows up in the snow of a cold Russian night while the family celebrates Chanukah warm and safe within. As the story unfolds, after the mendicant has come and gone, this *shnorer* turns out to have been, perhaps — it is never entirely clear — the Prophet Elijah, herald of *Moshiach*, the Messiah. Whatever he is, this ragged pauper, whether tattered or divine, has managed to bring at least the idea of the Beyond to this relentlessly commonplace earth.

The moral? Don't be so fast to dismiss the lowly. You never know who or what they truly are.

PART I

Birth and Growth

Long as the Jewish Exile

א איד האט ליב דעם געשמאק פון א אידיש ווארט אין זיין מויל.

A yid hot lib dem geshmak fun a yidish vort in zayn moyl.

A Jew likes the taste of a Yiddish word in his mouth.

At the beginning of the High Holy Days that mark the Jewish New Year, Yiddish speakers often eat carrots. They eat them raw, they eat them cooked with other vegetables in sweet hearty stews. *Farvus*, you ask; why? Ah, let me tell you. They eat them because of their love not of vegetables but of puns. The Yiddish word *mern* has two meanings. As a noun it means “carrots.” As a verb, it has a very different definition: “multiply.” The carrots convey the hope for more years to come, making *mern* a two-fer; the tastiest kind of Yiddish word.

After Rosh Hashonah and its carrots, the Days of Awe unfold, a week of contrition and introspection. As these solemn days approach their finale, a bowl of cabbage soup often appears on the table. All right; cabbage. Lowly, penitential, no?

You should be so lucky, an explanation that plain. The Yiddish dish comes from the phrase that passed directly from German into Yiddish, *kohl mit vaser*, cabbage with water, the unadorned fact of cabbage soup. Much tastier, however, is the play on the Hebrew phrase *kol mevaser*, a voice proclaiming. It is a phrase that the carrot-eating soup slurpers will soon be hearing as part of the service that ends the solemn time. Here is the classic Yiddish take on life: the voice of God translated into soup, soup transmogrified into the voice of God — and all in the form of offhanded punning culinary theology, learned around the supper table at home.

Thanks to their linguistic life story, Yiddish speakers have a full bag of multilingual tricks. A generation of Americans reared on tales of cowboys and Indians amused themselves by spinning elaborate jokes about Jeronowitz, Pocayenta, and their daughter Minnie Horowitz. Today, this same agile wordplay is skipping around the Internet: Recent Yiddish joke offerings included *goyfer*, a gentile messenger, and *blintzkreig*, a late-night refrigerator raid.

Yiddish began with the same impudent spirit, a hardy weed thrusting up between the cobblestones of the walled cities of medieval Europe. In our story, we will watch the scruffy language grow and branch out and blossom and bear fruit. Time and again we will see the heels of assault crush it down. And time and again we will watch it rise up, altered slightly but still itself, growing skyward once more. (“I rise once again and stride on” is the refrain of a Yiddish poem that, it should come as no surprise, became a popular song.)

We will use the language as a way to mark the meandering path of Jewish history. Then it will be time for a rest, maybe *a glezele tey*, *a shtikl broit*, *a shnapps* — a little glass of tea, a piece of bread, a drink of whiskey — in the shtetl, that archetypal Jewish town. We will track the language through the industrial and intellectual revolutions that swept Yiddish into the modern world. The language will blossom as its people, freed from the shackles of the past, stripped of the comforts of tradition, search for a future. Then we’re going to talk some geopolitical specifics — what happened in Eastern Europe, Russia, Israel, and the United States. The Holocaust will shut the curtain on much of the world we have come to know. We will pause to mourn and to pay our respects. Then, like the Yiddish language and the people who speak it, we will gather our strength and our memories, pick ourselves up, and stride on.

Yiddish will teach us about the resilience of the self and the construction of boundaries against “otherness.” It will show the deep satisfactions that come from community. We will learn how to make something from nothing, staring grim reality down the nose, one of the most popular subjects of Yiddish proverbs: *With weeping you pay no debts. Neither with cursing nor with laughter can one remake the world.* And one must always, in some way large or small, remake the world.

To understand how Yiddish arrived at its apparently weightless way of carrying such a heavy load is simple: We just have to start at the beginning of the world.

Jews measure time by cycles of exile and ingathering. They note episodes of destruction and, when they are lucky, rebirth. Mostly, though, it’s been wandering. In the distant, sunny biblical past, Jews dwelt in their God-given land of milk and honey, Eretz Israel, the land of Israel. It was the home of the prophets, the Matriarchs, and the Patriarchs, anchored by the Holy of Holies, the Temple, in Jerusalem. The Jews who lived and worshiped there spoke Hebrew, the same language in which, according to rabbinic lore, God spoke to the angels before He created the world. For traditional Jews the language is that ageless, that intertwined with the Jewish soul.

If you like numbers, you will want to know that scholars locate the beginnings of Hebrew somewhere in the middle of the second millennium before the Christian, or common, era. The name Hebrew is the English version of the biblical *ivriim*, Hebrews. Referring to Abraham and his family or, as he is called in Yiddish, *Avrom aveynu*, Abraham our ancestor, it means “the

people who crossed over.” They were wanderers even then. It is not clear whether Abraham actually spoke Hebrew, but we know that Moses did, some four hundred years later on. The parting of the Red Sea, the giving of the Law at Sinai, the wandering in the desert — these core events of the Jewish ethos, to whatever extent they really took place, took place through real Hebrew words.

In the infancy of the common era a related language, Aramaic, gradually supplanted Hebrew in daily speech as well as in some religious texts, such as the late-written Book of Daniel. We know that the two languages lived together for several centuries because, for example, of the practice of reciting certain prayers three times. This comes from a period when they were read twice in Hebrew, for tradition, and once in Aramaic, to make certain that everyone in the congregation actually understood them. Even then, there were a few whose Hebrew comprehension might have been a tad under par. For the purposes of this story we will say “Hebrew” and mean “Hebrew/Aramaic,” giving ourselves the benefit of pretending that history is simple. *If everyone pulled in one direction, the world would keel over.*

Hebrew is written in an alphabet all its own, although many of its letters make sounds that correspond to utterances in English. There are letters for sounds we would recognize as *b*, for example, as well as *t*, *m*, and *n*. But it is harder for non-Hebrew readers to pick out the familiar sounds because, unlike European languages, Hebrew is written from right to left. It does not distinguish between upper and lower cases, and several letters take special forms when they appear at the end of a word. Hebrew also has a different way of noting vowels: They are expressed as a system of dots and slashes that hover around their consonants, moons to their suns. Many books, including the Bible, are written without any vowels at all.

This is how you would write this sentence in vowel-less Hebrew:

.rbh sl-lv n cntns sht trw dlw y h s sht

Even if two people speak the same language, if they write it differently the language is perceived in a slightly different way. If we are literate, even as we speak words we have some mental sense of the way they are written. The fact that Jews have written a great variety of Jewish languages using the very same letters across continents and millennia is tremendously important. For Jews, the letters are in a sense alive. They have numerical equivalents suffused with mystic significance. In Yiddish-speaking Europe, small boys on their first day of *cheder*, school, would find the letters spelled out in honey, to let them know that learning was sweet. These delicious letters led the way back and forth, across oceans of exile, linking each child with that distant, golden land. *We Jews have many sicknesses, but amnesia is not one of them.*

When Jews recall their history, much of it is tragic. In ancient Israel, the Temple was destroyed twice. In Yiddish these cataclysms are referred to as *der ershter* and *der tsveyter khurbns*, the first and second destructions. The First Temple was destroyed in the sixth century B.C.E., before the common era, and

signaled the beginning of the Babylonian Exile. The Temple was rebuilt, but this Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., after which the long exile began. Although Jews today commonly use the Greek word *diaspora* for “dispersion,” the Yiddish term is *golus*. Of all the hundreds of thousands of words in the language, this one has gotten more than its share of use.

The stage for all this wandering was set in Hebrew. As Jews saw their Temple in ruins they cried in Hebrew, mourned in Hebrew, rent their biblical robes with Hebrew moans. The most primitive impulse of language, whether of a person or of a people, is often suffused with emotion. The baby’s unmediated sound only little by little gets formed into words. For tiny individuals or mighty nations, language lets us know who we are. Hebrew was the first language in which people consciously defined themselves as Jews.

After these Jews had finished covering themselves in *efer*, Hebrew for “ashes,” these cast-out Jews, without homes but with a clear sense of community, picked themselves up and moved on. They traveled on foot — entire families and clans. Often they ignored irony and seized opportunity, making their living as traders in the wake of those same Roman armies that had destroyed the epicenter of their ritual cult and evicted them from their ancestral home. (“Choose life” is one of the all-time popular biblical quotes.) And so, in time, many Jews found themselves on the other side of the Mediterranean, in Southern Europe.

As the Jews walked farther and farther from Jerusalem, their holy city, the one thing they always carried with them was words. Words are infinitely light and can be fashioned into stories, songs, and prayers. Because Jews venerated them so, they wrote them in perfect Hebrew, without mistake. They rolled the heavy parchment into scrolls and carried these “books” of the Torah, the Jewish Bible, along with them. Even today, in synagogue services, as the scrolls make their way on a symbolic march around the congregation, people eagerly touch their prayerbooks to the Torah, then kiss the corners of their books. For a people without a homeland, without a centralized clergy, without any universally recognized authority on this earth, the words were all there were. *A Jewish thief steals only books.*

In time, the wandering Jews settled down. They put down their Torahs and their books, set up *yeshivas*, religious schools. They waited for the Messiah to come, praying, “Bring us safely from the corners of the earth, and lead us in dignity to our holy land.” Every day they recited their Hebrew prayers, studied their Hebrew texts, spoke to each other in the Hebrew they remembered from the old land.

They also developed businesses, raised families, made homes. And because the territories they lived in were owned and ruled by Christians, they learned Christian languages. They had to. *Live among Jews, do business with goyim.* Sometimes Jews were forced to live in Jewish-only ghettos. More often they lived together by choice. Either way, Jews lived apart from their Christian