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Dear David,

You are an ideal promise-keeper! Thank you for sending along ~~my~~ your delectable talk; I regret having to miss the singing.

You've also cleared something up. About a year and a half ago I was on a panel with Tony Kushner and Benjamin Harshav. With Harshav on board, I certainly felt insufficient: what were my Yiddish credentials? (The subject was Yiddish; it was a Forward event, with Morris Dickstein as moderator.) But Kushner, though he modestly confessed, having no Jewish background, and no Jewish linguistic background, nevertheless declared an affinity for Yiddish. He attributed this, repeatedly, to his being gay. I was bewildered. You've explained it: "the voice of the ~~dispossessed~~ dispossessed," "The reclamation of a radical Yiddish sensibility." Aha!

The Landkentenish movement is wholly new to me. Yiddish-speaking Wandervögel?

I'm grateful to learn about the ~~Seminary's~~ Seminary's Karaism exhibit. I hope it lingers long enough for me to make the trek. The destination is exciting!

Your last two sentences: "a Jewish space defined by a singing, praying, blaspheming, studying, walking, hiking, struggling, ever-seeking folk," followed by "Learn Yiddish, and you can live there, too." This striking conclusion put me in mind of something Lore Segal sent me a few days ago. You may already have seen it, but I enclose it just in case. I disliked it, and I wonder what you would think. It seems to me that of the two categories it inhabits--mockery and elegy--it is more mockery than elegy.

Re the conference: The Diaspora is alive and well and living in Israel.

With warmest thoughts,

Guthrie X

P.S. The house is undergoing sandblasting, and the computer is under tarps. Hence this archaism, which, however, is advanced enough so that one can actually type and print out AT THE SAME TIME!!

n)ere X

"Useful Expressions"

Probably the saddest book that I own is a copy of *Say It In Yiddish*, edited by Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich, and published by Dover. I got it new, in 1993, but the book was originally brought out in 1958. It's part of a series, according to the back cover, with which I'm otherwise unfamiliar, the Dover "Say It" books. I've never seen *Say It In Swahili*, *Say It In Hindi*, or *Say It In Serbo-Croatian*, nor have I ever been to any of the countries where one of them might come in handy. As for the country in which I'd do well to have a copy of *Say It In Yiddish* in my pocket, naturally I've never been there either. I don't believe that anyone has.

When I first came across *Say It In Yiddish*, on a shelf in a big chain store in Orange County, California, I couldn't quite believe that it was real. There was only one copy of it, buried in the languages section at the bottom of the alphabet. It was like a book in a story by J. L. Borges, unique, inexplicable, possibly a hoax. The first thing that really struck me about it was, paradoxically, its unremarkableness, the conventional terms with which *Say It In Yiddish* advertises itself on its cover. "No other PHRASE BOOK FOR TRAVELLERS," it claims, "contains all these essential features." It boasts of "Over 1,600 up-to-date practical entries" (up-to-date!), "easy pronunciation transcription," and a "sturdy binding--pages will not fall out."

Inside, *Say It In Yiddish* delivers admirably on all the bland promises made by the cover. Virtually every eventuality, calamity, chance or circumstance, apart from the amorous, that could possibly befall the traveller is covered, under general rubrics like "Shopping," "Barber Shop and Beauty Parlor," "Appetizers," "Difficulties," with each of the over sixteen hundred up-to-date practical entries numbered, from 1, "yes," to 1611, "the zipper," a tongue-twister *Say It In Yiddish* renders, in roman letters, as BLITS-shleh-s'l. There are words and phrases to get the traveler through a visit to the post office to buy stamps in Yiddish, and through a visit to the doctor to take care of that krahmpf (1317) after one has eaten too much of the LEH-ber mit TSIB-eh-less (620) served at the cheap res-taw-RAHN (495) just down the EH-veh-new (197) from one's haw-TEL (103).

One possible explanation of at least part of the absurd poignance of *Say It In Yiddish* presents itself: that its list of words and phrases is standard throughout the "Say It" series. Once we accept the proposition of a modern Yiddish phrase book, Yidish versions of such phrases as "Where can I get a social security card?" and "Can you help me jack up the car?", taken in the context of the book's part of a uniform series, become more understandable. But an examination of the specific examples chosen for inclusion under the various, presumably standard, rubrics reveals that the Weinreichs have indeed served as editors here, considering their supposedly useful phrases with care, selecting, for example, to give Yiddish translations for the English names of the following foods, none of them very likely to be found under "Food" in the Swahili, Japanese, or Malay books in the series: stuffed cabbage, kreplach, blintzes, matzo, lox, corned beef, herring, kugel, tsimmiss, and schav. The fact that most of these words do not seem to require much work to get them into Yiddish suggests that *Say It In Yiddish* has been edited with a particular kind of reader in mind, the reader who is traveling, or plans to travel, to a

very particular kind of place, a place where one can expect to find both ahn OON-tehr-bahn (subway) and geh-FIL-teh FISH."

What were they thinking, the Weinreichs? Was the original 1958 Dover edition simply the reprint of some earlier, less heartbreakingly implausible book? At what time in the history of the world was there a place of the kind that the Weinreichs imply, a place where not only the doctors and waiters and trolley conductors spoke Yiddish, but also the airline clerks, travel agents, ferry captains, and casino employees? A place where you could rent a summer home from Yiddish speakers, go to a Yiddish movie, get a finger wave from a Yiddish-speaking hairstylist, a shoeshine from a Yiddish-speaking shineboy, and then have your dental bridge repaired by a Yiddish-speaking dentist? If, as seems likelier, the book first saw light in 1958, a full ten years after the founding of the country that turned its back once and for all on the Yiddish language, condemning it to watch the last of its native speakers die one by one in a headlong race for extinction with the twentieth century itself, then the tragic dimension of the joke looms larger, and makes the Weinreichs' intention even harder to divine. It seems an entirely futile effort on the part of its authors, a gesture of embittered hope, of valedictory daydreaming, of a utopian impulse turned cruel and ironic.

The Weinreichs have laid out, with numerical precision, the outlines of a world, of a fantastic land in which it would behoove you to know how to say, in Yiddish,

250. What is the flight number?

1372. I need something for a tourniquet.

1379. Here is my identification.

254. Can I go by boat/ferry to----?

The blank in the last of those phrases, impossible to fill in, tantalizes me. Whither could I sail on that boat/ferry, in the solicitous company of Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich, and from what shore?

I dream of two possible destinations. The first might be a modern independent state very closely analogous to the State of Israel--call it the State of Yisroel--a postwar Jewish homeland created during a time of moral emergency, located presumably, but not necessarily, in Palestine; it could be in Alaska, or on Madagascar. Here, perhaps, that minority faction of the Zionist movement who favored the establishment of Yiddish as the national language of the Jews were able to prevail over their more numerous Hebraist opponents. There is Yiddish on the money, of which the basic unit is the herzl, or the dollar, or even the zloty. There are Yiddish color commentators for soccer games, Yiddish-speaking cash machines, Yiddish tags on the collars of dogs. Public debate, private discourse, joking and lamentation, all are conducted not in a new-old, partly artificial language like Hebrew, a prefabricated skyscraper still under construction, with only the lowermost of its stories as yet inhabited by the generations, but in a tumbledown old palace capable in the smallest of its stones (the word nu) of expressing slyness, tenderness, derision, romance, disputation, hopefulness, skepticism, sorrow, a lascivious impulse, or the confirmation of one's worst fears.

The implications of this change in the official language of the "Jewish homeland," a change which, depending on your view of human character and its underpinnings, is either minor or fundamental, are difficult to sort out. I can't help thinking that such a nation, speaking its essentially European tongue, would, in the Middle East, stick out among its neighbors to an even greater degree than Israel does now. But would the Jews of a Mediterranean Yisroel be impugned and admired for having the same kind of character that Israelis, rightly or wrongly, are widely taken to have, the classic sabra personality: rude, scrappy, loud, tough, secular, hard-headed, cagey, pushy? Is it living in a near-permanent state of war, or is it the Hebrew language, or something else, that has made Israeli humor so dark, so barbed, so cynical, so untranslatable? Perhaps this Yisroel, like its cognate in our own world, has the potential to seem a frightening, even a harrowing place, as the following sequence, from the section on "Difficulties," seems to imply:

109. What is the matter here?

110. What am I to do?

112. They are bothering me.

113. Go away.

114. I will call a policeman.

I can imagine another Yisroel, the youngest nation on the North American continent, founded in the former Alaska Territory during World War II as a resettlement zone for the Jews of Europe. (For a brief while, I once read, Franklin Roosevelt was nearly sold on such a plan.) Perhaps after the war, in this Yisroel, the millions of immigrant Polish, Rumanian, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Austrian, Czech and German Jews held a referendum, and chose independence over proffered statehood in the U.S. The resulting country is obviously a far different place than Israel. It is a cold, northern land of furs, paprika, samovars and one long, glorious day of summer. The portraits on those postage stamps we buy are of Walter Benjamin, Simon Dubnow, Janusz Korczak, and of a hundred Jews unknown to us, whose greatness was allowed to flower only here, in this world. It would be absurd to speak Hebrew, that tongue of spikenard and almonds, in such a place. This Yisroel--or maybe it would be called Alyeska--is a kind of Jewish Sweden, social-democratic, resource rich, prosperous, organizationally and temperamentally far more akin to its immediate neighbor, Canada, than to its more freewheeling benefactor far to the south. Perhaps, indeed, there has been some conflict, in the years since independence, between the United States and Alyeska. Perhaps oilfields have been seized, fishing vessels boarded. Perhaps not all of the native peoples were happy with the outcome of Roosevelt's humanitarian policies and the treaty of 1948." Lately there may have been a few problems assimilating the Jews of Quebec, in flight from the ongoing separatist battles there.

This country of the Weinreichs is in the nature of a wistful fantasyland, a toy theater with miniature sets and furnishings to arrange and rearrange, painted backdrops on which the gleaming lineaments of a snowy Jewish Onhava can be glimpsed, all its grief

concealed behind the scrim, hidden in the machinery of the loft, sealed up beneath trap doors in the floorboards. But grief haunts every mile of that other destination to which the Weinreichs beckon, unwittingly perhaps but in all the awful detail that Dover's "Say It" series requires. Grief hand-colors all the postcards, stamps the passports, sours the cooking, fills the luggage. It keens all night in the pipes of old hotels. The Weinreichs are taking us home, to the "old country." To Europe.

In this Europe the millions of Jews who were never killed produced grand-children, and great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. The countryside retains large pockets of country people whose first language is still Yiddish, and in the cities there are many more for whom Yiddish is the language of kitchen and family, of theater and poetry and scholarship. A surprisingly large number of these people are my relations. I can go visit them, the way Irish Americans I know are always visiting second and third cousins in Galway or Cork, sleeping in their strange beds, eating their strange food, and looking just like them. Imagine. Perhaps one of my cousins might take me to visit the house where my father's mother was born, or to the school in Vilna that my grandfather's grandfather attended with the boy Abraham Cahan. For my relatives, though they will doubtless know at least some English,* I will want to trot out a few appropriate Yiddish phrases, more than anything as a way of reestablishing the tenuous connection between us; in this world Yiddish is not, as it is in ours, a tin can with no tin can on the other end of the string. Here, though I can get by without them, I will be glad to have the Weinreichs along. Who knows but that visting some remote Polish backwater I may be compelled to visit a dentist to whom I will want to cry out, having found the appropriate number (1447), eer TOOT meer VAY!

What is this Europe like, with its twenty-five, thirty, or thirty-five million Jews? Are they tolerated, despised, ignored by, or merely indistinguishable from their fellow modern Europeans? What is the world like, never having felt the need to create an Israel, that hard bit of grit in the socket that hinges Africa to Asia?

What does it mean to originate from a place, from a world, from a culture that no longer exists, and from a language that may die in this generation? What phrases would I need to know in order to speak to those millions of unborn phantoms to whom I belong?

Just what am I supposed to do with this book?

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* The assumption being that Michael Chabon would be in America, separated from the world of Yiddish! That he would, in any case, have left behind "fruster, poetry, + scholarship."