

Message From the President

Shalom,

The world is constantly changing, no less so as we approach the 21st century. In the Jewish world, there is serious talk of radical change.

One issue we face is the changing relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. A consequence of this changing relationship is the concern that more funds raised by local federations will remain in the United States, and less sent to Israel.

A major change under discussion by the national fund-raising and distributing bodies, the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF), United Jewish Appeal (UJA), and United Israel Appeal (UIA), is the possibility of merging these bodies. Such a merger would be a move to counter the flat campaigns of recent years, and to eliminate the expenses of maintaining three separate bureaucracies.

There are also major changes being contemplated in Israel. The Jewish Agency (JAFI), the body that distributes, in Israel, the funds raised by UJA, is exploring major restructuring. There is also talk of changes in the World Zionist Organization (WZO), the body that represents the Zionist movements. One proposal is that there be just one body — the Jewish Agency, and that the WZO be a part of JAFI, rather than a separate body. A committee, headed by Reform Rabbi Richard Hirsch, has given much time and thought to exploring these restructuring ideas.

This June, Jews from all over the world will gather in Jerusalem for meetings of the Zionist General Council of the WZO and the Jewish Agency Assembly. In those gatherings, the restructuring ideas will be presented. There will be a great deal of discussion, undoubtedly very heated discussion, before final decisions for change are made.

Na'amat Israel has always been in the forefront of change. The movement came into existence in 1921 to change the role of women in rebuilding the Jewish homeland.

Over the years, it has led the struggle to elevate the status of women, and to protect the rights of women. When the early pioneer women needed to enter the workforce, Na'amat established vocational training schools to prepare them with the training they needed.

In those early years of Israel's statehood, as hundreds of thousands of immigrants poured into the country, Na'amat was there to assist them in their absorption.

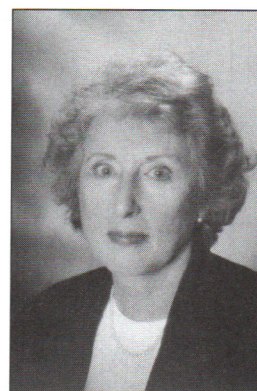
When the war widows and orphans of the Six-Day War needed legal advice, Na'amat established its legal aid services to help them. When Na'amat discovered that there were thousands of single-parent families in Israel, it established Mehad as a support system.

In the early 1950s, Na'amat recognized that some day there would be peace between Israel and the Arabs, and it established its Arab Women's Department, which has become a bridge to peace with Israel's Arab neighbors.

When women elected to religious councils were not permitted to take their seats, Na'amat went to the courts — and won for them the right to take their places.

When Na'amat became aware of the problem of domestic violence in Israeli society, it established the first center for the prevention and treatment of violence in the family. Now Na'amat operates four such centers and a battered women's shelter.

When the Rabbinate refused to convert children adopted from abroad unless the parents agreed to become Orthodox, Na'amat arranged a conversion ceremony with the help of Conservative rabbis.



Sylvia Lewis

Na'amat continues to set the pace for innovative changes as they are needed.

Today Na'amat continues to set the pace in Israel for new and innovative changes as they are needed. Current projects include the establishment of an adoption agency to assist Israeli parents in adopting children from abroad, and campaigning for family courts with the authority to conduct civil marriages and divorces.

As partners with Na'amat Israel, we have been proud to play a part in these history-making projects. They have set an example for us and taught us that we, too, should be concerned with women's issues and Jewish issues in our own community.

Today, throughout the United States, NA'AMAT USA's councils and chapters have become paceset-
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A Birds-Eye Look at Yiddish

by ISIDORE HAIBLUM



YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Yiddish theater thrived between the two World Wars. Shown is a 1936 Polish production of Sholom Aleichem's "Tevye the Milkman," with Maurice Schwartz.

When my mother was a subscriber to *Na'amat Woman* — in those days called *The Pioneer Woman* — most of the magazine was in Yiddish. It arrived in our home like an old friend bearing news of her beloved organization's latest activities. Not merely the magazine but the whole organization was Yiddish. Things have changed — so much in fact that Yiddish is now no more than a memory for many "Pioneer Women," prompting this article, "A Birds-Eye Look At Yiddish" — what it was and what it has become. My mother would have applauded, but then she applauded anything that had to do with Yiddish. So did the rest of Pioneer Women.

Yiddish began about a thousand years ago, give or take a year, in what is now Germany, on the left bank of the Rhine and the area that makes up the Moselle basin. That is somewhere between Cologne and Spyer — only no one knows where for sure, and no one has spoken Yiddish there in recent or even distant memory. To make up for this oversight, Yiddish, today, is spoken somewhere on every continent except Antarctica. In Teaneck, New Jersey, for instance, Irving Nussbaum speaks it; at least he used to.

All together, almost two million people, half of them living in the United States, still speak Yiddish, or understand it, or remember understanding it. Many of these people can neither read nor write Yiddish. They would be deemed illiterate in a country where Yiddish was the national language. Fortunately for them, there is no such country, nor has there ever been. (New York's Lower East Side around 1914 *felt* like a Yiddish country to many of its inhabitants. And the Soviet Union in 1934 proclaimed Birobidzhan in eastern Siberia a Jewish, Yiddish-speaking, autonomous region, but few Jews were bamboozled into living there.)

At its peak in 1939, Yiddish was spoken by about eleven million, mainly in Eastern Europe and America. In Europe, most of these speakers were murdered by Hitler. Stalin, who initially appeared to support Yiddish institutions in the U.S.S.R., quickly turned against them. They were destroyed, along with their leading supporters. In the United States, Yiddish speakers assimilated. Even the children of Yiddish leaders grew up shunning Yiddish. *Especially* the children of Yiddish leaders, for

these leaders knew only too well how little Yiddish leaders actually earned. The last thing they wanted was for their offspring to be paupers, too. (Isaac Bashevis Singer has written about this melancholy situation, and been denounced by these very same leaders. But not their children, who couldn't read him in the Yiddish original.)

Today, Yiddish is still spoken by three groups.

1) *The elderly.* About eighty years ago, *The Jewish Daily Forward* was the world's largest Yiddish daily, with a quarter of a million circulation. Now, the *Forward* is a weekly, read by about 5,000. A sure sign that the elderly are not getting any younger.

2) *The ultra-Orthodox.* Hasidim, as a rule, speak Yiddish, and there are a half million of them. However, they view secular Yiddish, its books, plays, songs, newspapers and institutions as frivolous or wicked. When experts argue that Yiddish is dying, one need only cite Williamsburg, Crown Heights, Borough Park, Monsey, or New Square, N.Y. to win countless points. In these communities, Hasidic children grow up speaking Yiddish as though it were the national language. In fact, the number of native Yiddish speakers in the U.S. is, amazingly, *growing*. (In 1980, there were about 892,000, by the turn of the century 1,046,900 is the projected figure.) Hasidim *do* have large families. For the Yiddish linguists this may be dandy. But Yiddish playwrights, novelists, poets, and short story writers are out of luck. What is dying, then, is the *secular* branch of Yiddish. But even it still has some powerful advocates, namely:

3) *Students and teachers.* About sixty colleges offer some sort of Yiddish courses. But while many of these courses begin with plenty of students, usually, before the term is half over, more than two-thirds have left, having discovered that Yiddish is just as hard to learn as Hebrew or Japanese. And, even worse, there are no tourist bureaus that send vacationers off to Yiddishland at half price or even full price. Those who actually learn the language, unless they intend to become Yiddish professors themselves, can usually "speak to the wall" — a fine Yiddish expression, if not very encouraging.

The first Yiddish speakers — a thousand years ago — were Jewish immigrants from France and Italy and had no



Jewish life flourished in Bialystok, Poland in 1932. Women are bringing Sabbath cholent to the baker's oven.

idea they were speaking Yiddish. They thought they were speaking Middle High German. These folks, in their "old country" spoke something called Judeo-Italian and Judeo-French. Doubtless known to them as "good old Jewish." Linguists tell us that is where the Romance component in Yiddish comes from. (Romance languages are the modern descendants of Latin: Italian, French, Spanish, and Dalmatian, which, like the Dodo, is now extinct.)

Yiddish is made up of components, just like other languages. English is a mix of Anglo-Saxon, Romance and Scandinavian components. Yiddish has

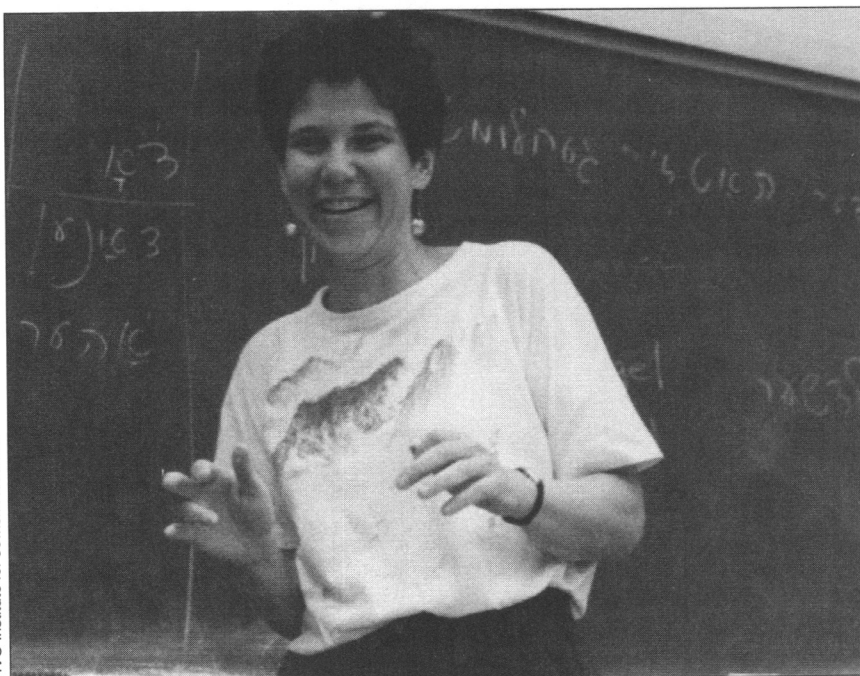
Germanic (over eighty percent), Slavic (about ten percent), and Hebrew-Aramaic (a bit under ten percent). And more than a touch of English, too.

This may sound more like the United Nations than a language. What is confusing is that some of the languages that went to make up Yiddish are still alive and kicking. While the Anglo-Saxon of English is pushing up the daisies, and only very *smart* people are able to identify it, or would even want to.

If you know German, you do not necessarily know Yiddish. There are loads of changes in syntax, meaning



In 1908, the Czemowitz Yiddish Language Conference (in what was then Austria-Hungary) was called to discuss the role and future of the Yiddish language. From left: Abraham Reisen, I. L. Peretz, Sholem Asch, Chaim Zhitlowsky and H. D. Nomberg.



Recent class at the Uriel Weinreich Program in Yiddish Language Literature and Culture, sponsored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and Columbia University, New York.

and pronunciation. And what German knows Hebrew-Aramaic? (Which for some is the very heart of the language.)

Hebrew dates back to the biblical era — that's about 3,500 years ago — and sounds most impressive today when being spoken by men with long beards. Israelis, even the clean shaven ones, don't do a bad job either.

Aramaic, a bit younger, was spoken by the ancient Babylonians, and picked up by the Jews during their Babylonian exile (586–538 B.C.).

Leaving Slavic, which entered the picture in the 13th and 14th centuries when the Crusades compelled the Jews to leave Western for Eastern Europe, thus adding important elements from Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Rumanian, etc. to Yiddish. Though these Jews no doubt would have been quite content to remain just where they were and forgo this enrichment, if left alone.

English in Yiddish begins with the waves of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States in the late 19th century. That's how come the Gettysburg Address was translated into Yiddish. Not by Abe, but by the immigrants, who wanted a grand historic work in their own language. (The favor has been returned, and English can now boast of hundreds of Yiddish words in its vocabulary. Naturally, the boasting is done in English.)

Over most of its existence, Yiddish

was rubbing shoulders with Hebrew, which until recently was used only in prayer, study of religious texts, and letters between learned Jews. Yiddish was the everyday language, what you used to order club soda and a pastrami sandwich.

No schools taught Yiddish until the beginning of the 20th century. If you were a boy you learned Hebrew in *chayder* — usually, a one-room religious school. Yiddish was picked up by osmosis. Everyone spoke it. And since Yiddish uses a slightly modified version of the Hebrew alphabet, boys in *chayder* had no trouble. Girls, of course, were out of luck. Until the late 19th century most of them could neither read nor write.

The duty of Orthodox men in those days — and who wasn't Orthodox? — was to pray and study the holy texts. So they went to school. Women blessed the Sabbath candles, raised children, kept house, and supported the family while the husband studied. No school for them. What these ladies needed was a good union.

Devotional books and "entertainments" began to appear in Yiddish soon after the invention of the printing press. They were meant mainly for women — who couldn't read them. Sometimes, women who *had* managed to become literate did the job, reading such works as *The Bovo Book* (1507) by Elia

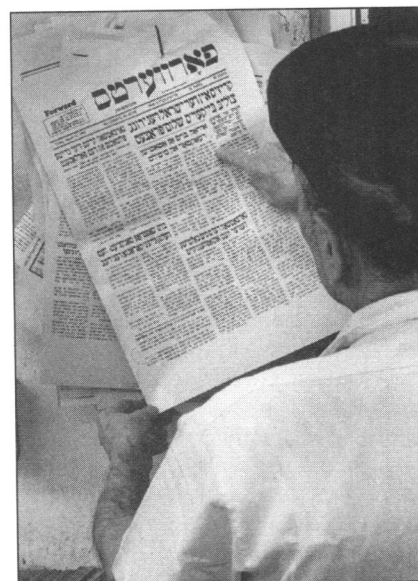
Levita, a medieval Yiddish romance, *The Maase Book* (1602), an anonymous compilation of Talmudic and medieval folktales, or the *Tzena Urena* (1618), a retelling of Bible stories by Jacob ben Isaak Ashkenazi, out loud to other women. Boys also were drafted for this kind of work, although there was little future in it.

Most Yiddish speakers took Yiddish for granted, it was one of seventeen Jewish exile languages — like Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) or Judeo-Arabic, and the largest. But the 18th-century Jewish enlightenment movement, the *Haskalah*, which began in Germany, tagged Yiddish a jargon, an impediment to education, and a barrier to becoming part of the modern world.

Yiddish stock plummeted among the well educated. But this news, delivered in German, didn't reach the Jewish masses, who knew only Yiddish. So the "enlighteners" had to stoop to writing their message in Yiddish. This brought a surge in learning to Yiddish readers but failed to put a dent in Yiddish itself. In fact, it served as a kind of inspiration for literary types who wanted to write in the language of their own people.

Hasidism, founded by the Bal Shem Tov (1700–1760), also laid the groundwork for modern Yiddish literature by producing grand storytellers whose works were transcribed and thus preserved.

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Printer at the Yiddish language *Forverts* in New York looking at a page proof of the newspaper, 1990.

Courtesy, the Forward

read Viktor Frankl's book, *Man's Search For Meaning*, and felt that Frankl was a remarkable and admirable man to have been imprisoned in several concentration camps and to have survived these extremely adverse conditions—partly due to his inner goals. He needed to be alive to be reunited with any of his family members who also might live, and he needed to survive to complete a book he had been writing before he was placed in the camp.

Only now, through my hospital experience, did I really fully understand what Frankl was saying. I learned that I, too, had a purpose in life.

As I was recovering and able to get around, I noticed that a number of patients were critically ill and lonely. So I stopped to talk with some of them. More than once I observed the smiles on their faces when I simply said, "Hello. How are you?" I felt good when I saw that showing concern for others who were ill could change their lives even for just a brief moment. I felt good that I was able to try to pay back the kindness others had given me.

I took these lessons to heart and began to follow my own recovery with a new purpose. One year after my hospitalization I began volunteer work at the same hospital where I had my operation. I chose to be a visitor in the alternate level of care program, which involves people who are in long-term care—many awaiting nursing home placements, and some of whom would die in the hospital.

As part of my volunteer work I had an opportunity to take a pastoral counseling course which had representatives from many different religions. I learned about *bikur cholim*, the Hebrew term for visiting the sick, and its long and honored history as a *mitzvah* (a good deed) in Jewish tradition. I learned that pastoral care is rooted in the 23rd Psalm. I learned that we are all responsible for ourselves, our parents and our children. We learn from our parents and teach our children. When our parents or any others are frail and need our help, we are there to give the help, and we become enriched by giving it as we help ourselves and others to survive and to find meaning in our lives.

My volunteer work gave me a much fuller understanding of the term "mitzvah" than I had known before. I remember my parents teaching me that it is important to perform a mitzvah because if I help others I am being kind and good. I performed a mitzvah now and then. I knew I should in order to make me a better person. I liked that my parents were proud of me for doing it.

As I became involved in *bikur cholim*, however, I really began for the first time to understand the true meaning of a mitzvah. I started to visit the sick because I felt that I should do so in order to pay back all who had been kind to me during my hospitalization. Part of a mitzvah is indeed as my parents and Hebrew school teachers taught me, that I should help others, and I often do feel good when I do that. But *bikur cholim* showed me that there is much more to a mitzvah. I no longer look only at the "should" of the mitzvah. The "should" has turned into a

It took a brain tumor for me to find my special purpose in life.

"must." *Bikur cholim*, for me, has become an obligation. It is an act that I must do in order to more fully understand my own life and to live it to the fullest.

I probed ever deeper into the idea of mitzvah and made another discovery. The moral obligation to perform the deed simultaneously opened up a new part of myself. As I give what I can during the act of visiting the sick and dying, I gain so much more through the experience than anything I could possibly ever give. That is a mitzvah's delicate Jewish balance; we are called upon to perform a moral act and, as we do it, perhaps not even wholly understanding why we help. The act transforms us in ways we did not expect.

Bikur cholim provides so many benefits for me that even though, objectively, some of the circumstances

are painful, the obligation to be with a critically ill or dying person often takes over. I grow from the experience.

It helps me understand how to use my life to the fullest. It helps me appreciate my good health. It helps me understand and deal with my own past more fully. It helps me understand the dying process and the frailty of human life.

Each person I visited and got to know for however little time taught me something. Elderly patients gave me firsthand accounts of history—their life experience from a generation ago. Critically ill patients taught me more about living life from day to day and appreciating things that often I never stopped to take the time to even notice.

One ninety-two-year-old woman told me how she had accepted her advanced age and its impairments and chose to enjoy the time she had left. When she was eighty-seven she had earned a high school equivalency diploma. She had only been hospitalized for a few days for some tests this time, and now she was to go home. We all seemed to feel her joy when, as she was being wheeled out in a wheelchair to get a cab to go home, she held up her right hand, and playfully yelled out "toot toot."

One sixty-year-old man suffered a heart attack and was in an oxygen mask the first time I met him. I helped feed him his lunch and talked with him. The next three times I saw him, his condition had deteriorated. He was hooked up to many machines and would only open his eyes for very brief moments or not at all while I was there. I'm not sure if he knew me, but I still came for about an hour at a time and held his hand and talked to him.

Intuitively, I knew that all human beings benefit from the sense of touch. Just as an infant needs to be held and cuddled, so too is it important for a critically ill person to have some human contact. It is imperative that the dying do not feel totally abandoned during the dying process.

Visiting this man brought back a memory to me that was a painful part of my childhood. Visiting all these people helped me finally deal with a part of my past that I had never been able to deal with before.

My father had suffered three heart

attacks and a stroke as I was growing up. When I was fourteen he died in the hospital after having spent several days in coma under an oxygen tent. Our family camped out in the waiting room, and we were allowed to go into his room for a few minutes at a time, if we wanted to. I didn't want to, but there was an inner pull that urged me to visit my dying father several times. I don't think I talked to my father or held his hand. I realize only now that this inner pull was my way of dealing with my father's impending death in the best way that I could at that age.

Visiting this dying man almost thirty years after the death of my father was, I realized, the way that I could finally mourn and accept my father's death. My experiences with the sick and dying helped me understand and come to terms with this death experience that had been hidden away, lying dormant within me for all those thirty years.

Other patients too have helped me deal with my father's death. I became especially attached to one ninety-six-year-old man who was paralyzed and on a respirator. I couldn't carry on long conversations with him because I had difficulty understanding him, but I always spent an hour massaging his neck and head and reading to him. The smile of recognition when I walked into his room meant that he felt a little less lonely and a little happier knowing someone cared. What he gave to me, however, was probably more than he could ever know. His smile lit up my insides for a brief moment.

I now understood more completely what Viktor Frankl meant about finding one's goals and meanings in life. The feelings of inner warmth, which only occurred sometimes and which lasted for only a brief moment were my indications that I had found something very meaningful to me in my life. As I rubbed his neck, my thoughts so often went back to joyous times I had experienced with my father, and I would often think about what life might have been like had my father lived longer and had he enjoyed better health. I often thought: "Daddy, I am memorializing you when I visit the sick and dying. You taught me the joy of being there—of taking the time to look and listen and of showing compassion."

I knew the ninety-six-year-old man

for over two years before he died. In some ways I feel as if I lost my father again. It is painful, but through this pain I grow. I can work through this grief. I can memorialize these people who have given me so much by giving time to comfort others in need. What I have learned from the previous generation I can try to pass on to my four children through my actions.

I also began to volunteer in a home for the aged. Recently, I wheeled a ninety-eight-year-old man to visit an eighty-three-year-old woman, and we all talked together. I didn't say anything when the man said, "I wish that God would take me soon." Then the woman explained that since she had suffered her stroke, "things were so different." She couldn't express herself the way she used to. It took time to think of the words to communicate what she was thinking. Sometimes the words didn't come, and she had to try to write them out.

I listened, and I heard their message and understood a little more about some of the frustrations of the frailties of old age. I thought about my memory loss after my surgery and how degraded I had felt. I was able to recover from that quickly, but this woman who had suffered a stroke would certainly not recover her memory very quickly, if at all. I saw that my being there to listen made them realize that they still had much to give to others through their expressions of their discomfort. They soon changed the subject and reminisced about how the world was when they were young. Their stories were fascinating.

Each time I go into a room to visit a patient I feel nervous and excited at the same time. I am afraid of what I might find. It pains me to see the mental and physical suffering some patients are experiencing. But somehow that inner pull, my obligation to be there, wins out, and I go inside, I learn from the experience. Sometimes there is joy, and sometimes there is pain. Always it is a mitzvah.

Sharon Selib Epstein is a freelance writer whose work has been published in The New York Times, Growing Parent and American Baby Magazine, among other periodicals. She lives in Stony Brook, N.Y.

LOOK AT YIDDISH

(continued from page 6)

Modern Yiddish literature, which began with Mendele Mocher Sform, Sholom Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz in the latter part of the 19th century, went on to produce every conceivable type of writing during the next hundred years. Yiddish stock went up considerably. At least among those who could read these writings.

YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, co-founded by Dr. Max Weinreich in 1926, put Yiddish on the world's academic map. Yiddish text books, grammars, dictionaries, and hundreds of scholarly studies were originated by this organization. Even non-Jews took notice, especially if they were college professors. The YIVO building rang with competing Yiddish dialects. Today one hears mostly English.

Yiddish theater between the two World Wars held forth on two continents — thirteen full-time theaters competing for customers in New York alone. A thousand Yiddish books were published each year. The Yiddish press and periodicals in America had a combined circulation of 775,000, and since Jews had large families, were probably read by twice that number. Jewish socialist, cultural, fraternal and educational organizations all held their meetings in Yiddish.

Then came the Holocaust and World War II.

In all, about fifty Yiddish periodicals are still published around the world; their readership is scant. No Yiddish dailies are left in the United States. The stage is dark today at the Yiddish theater, except for a few weekend companies like the *Folksbiene*. Some seventy-five Yiddish books still appear yearly, but many are reprints or scholarly studies.

So where are we? In college — where every Jewish mother wants her children to be. And where one can study Yiddish just like Latin. And learn all kinds of nice words. But not the words in *this* article, which, alas, despite being in a Jewish magazine, are all in English. Welcome to modern times.

Isidore Haiblum is a novelist living in New York City who has had sixteen books published over the last two decades. He has also written numerous articles about Yiddish, humor and popular culture for a variety of magazines.