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The Enduring Pull Of Yiddish

What's behind the recent revival? And what does it tell us about ourselves?

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What is it that draws us to Yiddish, a dying language that has been breathing its last gasp for hundreds of years? What strange richness and flexibility does this language contain that permits chasidim in Brooklyn, gay writers on the Lower East Side and thoroughly secular celebrities and klezmer musicians to speak of Yiddish with tears, hyperbole, pride and angst?

CULTURE VIEW

For some, Yiddish is the sign of Jewish religious authenticity, a symbol of continuity that cannot be broken by the Holocaust or global migration. For others it is the symbol of childhood and community, of a warm embrace and a nostalgia for a simpler time when a Jew was a Jew was a Jew. Yiddish can be the symbol of the avant-garde ever present in Judaism, its pungency and ability to absorb change indicative of the Jews' mandate to be at the forefront of social and political change. Or it can be a symbol of the *freilich* folk spirit, manifested with great emotion and pathos through klezmer music.

Daniel Schifrin, *director of communications at the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, reads Sholom Aleichem in translation from the Upper West Side.*

Why such a variety of associations, and why all the spilled ink about whether Yiddish is on the way in or the way out?

It's possible that the romance with Yiddish has less to do with the language itself than with the *idea* of Yiddish. And therefore "Yiddish" — the language, the political and social history, and its many other associations — has become a kind of Rorschach test for (Ashkenazi) American Jews, allowing them to use it to buttress the views they hold most dear about Jewish life. Yiddish, when translated into English, means simply "Jewish." To many they are one and the same.

Klezmer Plus, one of the many Eastern European-style bands enjoying popularity through a Yiddish cultural revival in America.

The use of Yiddish for ulterior (although not necessarily exploitative) motives has received its most lucid and systematic exposition by Jewish Theological Seminary Professor David Roskies in his recent book "A Bridge of Longing." In it, he describes how 19th- and 20th-century Jewish writers used the Yiddish language as a way to reconnect to the community, but in the service of a distinctly modern, literary agenda. Sophisticates like Sholom Aleichem and I.L. Peretz characteristically spoke in a folk vein in order to represent subtle philosophical and sociological arguments that at a certain point had almost nothing to do with the actual lives of the people represented (they ate it up anyway).

But, as Roskies discusses in the book's introduction, the natural desire to see the past reflected in the present occurs today in Jewish life in the Shlomo Carlebach tunes we believe have existed for generations, for instance, or in the adoption of chasidic modes of worship as if they were egalitarian, new-age spiritual ideas consistent with living "after the tradition."

The more Yiddish dies and recedes into the past, the more interpretations and agendas the language and literature will be able to accommodate.

And the more Israel and the Holocaust recede as the centerpieces of identity for the majority of American Jews, and the safer Jews feel in America, the more Yiddish may represent the cultural heritage of a people now calling themselves Jewish-Americans.

Ruth Wisse, who holds Harvard University's Yiddish studies chair, has suggested that the Yiddish "revival" trumpeted by so many is really an unprecedented decline, with the real future of Yiddish to be found in libraries and literature classrooms. That may be. It will be interesting to note the direction of a place like the National Yiddish Book Center, perhaps the fastest-growing Jewish organization in the country, as it tries to balance rescuing and housing Yiddish books with promoting a living language.

It will also be interesting to watch the use of Yiddish in a community like Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where tens of thousands of Satmar chasidim speak it as an everyday language. Wisse has said that Yiddish cannot live outside of the European religious community that spawned it, and the Satmar chasidim are doing everything possible to re-create that community.

In the same way that American Orthodoxy has thrived despite being declared a dinosaur only a generation ago, Yiddish may thrive likewise a few generations from now.

Although arguments about the future of Yiddish sometimes spill out into the larger Jewish and mainstream American world — as evidenced in recent articles about Yiddish survival in The New York Times Magazine and the New Republic — American Jews by and large seem content to enjoy Yiddish as one of the few things that the entire community can appreciate and share.

What else, after all, does a secular Jewish playwright, shopping near his hip Williamsburg studio, say to his chasidic neighbor but "*Nu, was tut a yid*?" ("How are you, or literally, what does a Jew do?") □