



*MAME-LOSHN*  
**A HISTORY OF YIDDISH  
CULTURE**

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Columbia University

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**Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations**  
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## Introduction

Max Weinreich, the historian of Yiddish, tells a well-known story. A Jewish woman is in labor. She cries out, in French, "*O mon dieu*" and in Russian, "*Bozhe moy,*" but when she cries out in Yiddish, "*Got in himl*" ("Oh my god")<sup>1</sup>, she is truly in the middle of giving birth. This story has many implications and interpretations that bear on the cultural history of Yiddish, but we will only dwell on one here, to introduce the story of the Yiddish language. Yiddish, or *mame-loshn* ("mother tongue"), one of the names its speakers have called the language, is the intimate code of Jewish speakers that takes them deep into their personalities and allows them to communicate with themselves and with their fellow Jews. Although they may know other languages, it is Yiddish that expresses their essence as individuals and as a group.

## In The Beginning

The history of Yiddish has been synonymous with the development of Ashkenazic Jewry for most of its history. Ashkenaz is the name used in Jewish medieval texts for the Jewish cultural area associated with Germanic territory. Although the name is first mentioned in the book of Genesis (10:3), it is not clear why this appellation was applied. Ashkenazic Jews derived from this area, eventually spreading out from Western and Central Europe into Eastern Europe, and emigrating to the Western Hemisphere, Palestine (later the state of Israel), South Africa and Australia.

The beginnings of Yiddish, like the genesis of Ashkenaz, is usually traced back to the 9th century to the region of the Rhine and Moselle rivers; in which the cities of Mainz, Worms and Speyer are located. This is a time when Jews from old French and old Italian cultural areas settled in the area. However, no linguistic evidence for Yiddish exists for this period, other than fragmentary signs of Ashkenazic names on gravestones.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from Yiddish and Hebrew are given in parentheses and in quotation marks. Explanations of Yiddish and Hebrew terms are given in parentheses without quotation marks.

The German Jewish settlements expanded in size and number, covering a larger area of Germanic territory. This occurred despite the devastations of the Crusades starting in 1096 and subsequent local expulsions and readmissions of Jews. Not only was a Jewish presence increasingly clear, but Ashkenaz eventually developed its own traditional Jewish way of life which was influential far beyond its borders. The sages of Ashkenaz became known throughout the greater Jewish world for their method of study and interpretation of the Talmud. The early settlements included not only a variety of locations in Southern Germanic lands, but also Prague in Western Slavic territory. By the 13th century, Jews were invited to live and work in Poland by the local nobility. This started a movement eastward which by the 18th century shifted the center of Ashkenaz to Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe the development of the shtetl, the small town whose population often consisted of a Jewish majority, and the strict restrictions which prevented acculturation of Jews to Russian society provided a situation that nurtured the evolution of a rich, diverse culture in Yiddish. Such was not the case in Western Europe. Beginning with the Emancipation and the work of Moses Mendelssohn in Germany at the end of the 18th century, Yiddish-speaking Jews in the cities became increasingly involved in German culture while abandoning their Yiddish roots.

For more than two thousand years Jews have been speaking languages, other than Hebrew, which differ from those of their non-Jewish neighbors. These Jewish languages represent fusions of three kinds of linguistic elements: the Jewish language of the previous settlement, *loshn koydesh* ("holy tongue") or the Hebrew and Aramaic of religious texts, and the current coterritorial language of the neighboring non-Jews. In the case of Yiddish, these factors would have been the Jewish varieties of old French and old Italian, *loshn koydesh* and the neighboring German dialects. According to Max Weinreich's theory, fusion of these three elements occurred from the beginning of the new Jewish settlement and of the Yiddish language. Accordingly, his theory holds that Jews in that period never spoke German.

Although these general contours describe the early setting for the development of Yiddish culture, several issues of controversy remain. The early linguistic evidence implies an influence of Southeastern German dialects. It is not known how much the Germanic component of early Yiddish diverged from the coterritorial German dialects. In fact, some scholars who base their theories on written texts

argue that for the first few hundred years of contact, coterritorial Yiddish and German were essentially the same. Others dismiss the sole reliance on limited written texts, whose status is poorly understood. In addition, we do not know the relative influence of Italian versus French Jewish immigration to Ashkenaz. As for the Hebraic component, some scholars maintain that the influence of Hebrew and Aramaic on Yiddish was solely via the written texts, whereas others argue for the significance of oral sources and traditions. There is also the possibility of an earlier influence of Jewish Slavic language speakers on the development of the language before the eastward migration.

All scholars accept the overwhelming significance of the shift in the center of cultural gravity from Germanic to Slavic lands by the beginning of the 18th century. Undoubtedly, the effect of contact with Slavic-speaking peoples had already been felt for hundreds of years, even though older Yiddish texts only demonstrate a limited vocabulary of words of Slavic origin, most commonly, *khotsh* ("although, at least") and *nebekh* ("unfortunately"). Thus scholars and speakers alike characterize Yiddish as a fusion language, composed of components that derive from the stock languages and cultures: Germanic, Hebrew and Aramaic, Romance, and Slavic. Weinreich refers to the componential sensitivity of Yiddish speakers, but although such awareness does hold, one should not assume that speakers or even scholars can easily ascribe language elements to the different components. Like all languages and cultures, Yiddish is an integrated, interlocking whole.

In the West pockets of Yiddish continued on in Alsace, Holland and Switzerland, even after World War II. Striving for autonomy and authenticity, Yiddish developed a love-hate relationship with German culture. In Germany after Emancipation, Jews in the cities turned toward German culture, and Yiddish survived only in small towns and villages up until World War II. In the East (Poland, the Baltic states, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Belorussia and Ukraine), German remained a hidden standard for Yiddish. At times, such as the turn of the 20th century, new borrowings from this dominant European culture flooded the language, but Yiddish culture persisted to evolve its indigenous ways.

During subsequent history much of Ashkenazic Jewry emigrated from Eastern Europe, especially starting at the end of the 19th century, setting up new lives and Jewish communal organizations in the United States and Canada, South America, Western Europe, South Africa and

Australia. In these new lands, immigrants continued their interpersonal and cultural expression in Yiddish, as they evolved identities in relation to their current contacts. Rarely did involvement with Yiddish continue into the generation of their grandchildren. The Yiddish heartland of East Central Europe that thrived for hundreds of years was decimated by Nazi Germany during World War II. Only the Soviet Union was left with a sizeable Jewish population, but the government, after a brief period of the flourishing of Yiddish culture following the Revolution, repressed all Jewish cultural expression. Yiddish remained a family affair, competing with the stronger influences of the officially sanctioned major culture, not altogether dissimilar to the uprooted situation in the lands of immigration.

## Language, Culture And Society

Yiddish, the centuries-old communicative code of Ashkenazic Jews, exhibits features similar to those of most known languages. The specificity of the language lies in the uniqueness of the historical experience of its speakers in Central and Eastern Europe.

We are used to thinking of language as that which can be placed between the covers of a grammar or dictionary and can be taught in the classrooms of a high school, college or Berlitz course. When we start to observe language in action, as a communicative code that is embedded in gesture, body movement, complex attitudinal positions, diverse settings and situations, indeed, when we broaden our concept of language to embrace all of communication behavior, there is no way to tease language away from the culture and society which nurtures the thoughts and feelings of individuals. If culture is approached broadly as the shared values that groups can transmit from generation to generation, we can appreciate language even more as the mediator for the transmission of culture both horizontally amongst the members of the social group and vertically through different age groups and between group members living in different eras.

The history of Yiddish is as old as the Ashkenazic Jewish cultural group and develops as its speakers move through history. Much of this essay will focus on the texts and literature of these speakers, the corpus of spoken and written language in its social setting. Evidence from spoken language is crucial, since virtually all

Ashkenazic Jews used this form of communication, whereas many did not read or write. The difficulty in reconstructing linguistic and cultural history, in general, lies in the absence of direct oral evidence. We must remember that written documents are but a meager and, most often, socially skewed and limited record.

When we use language, although on occasion we may be innovative and individualistic, most of our behavior reflects ways of communicating that have evolved over the generations. Thus, a Yiddish speaker today in Buenos Aires, Argentina, may share ways of talking with Jews in Paris, France, and Tel Aviv, Israel, but also with Jews in Bialystok, Poland, of 60 years ago and Worms in the German Rhineland of 900 years ago. These pan-Yiddish features may appear in the form of words, syntactic features, idiomatic phrases, changes in intonation, or the movement of a hand or cheek muscle.

The functions for Yiddish within various cultural and social niches in Ashkenaz were elaborated in different ways during history. These uses and domains developed in relation to the roles of Hebrew and non-Jewish languages. Despite the fact that I have argued that language is so much more than an aggregate of words that can be located in a dictionary, let us briefly look at some words that have been generated by the Yiddish crucible.

*Mentsh* at first glance seems to be the same as the German word for "person," but in Yiddish it has also taken on the meaning of "mature, reliable person, someone with good character and admirable attributes." *Yente*, the common feminine name, which has in recent history taken on the negative stereotype of a gossip and nosey person, was originally a name that connoted a noble woman, deriving from the Old Italian *gentile*. *Unterzogn* ("to prompt") is one of many adverbial complemented verbs in Yiddish that appear Germanic in garb, yet do not have analogues in German, but rather turn out to be loan translations from Slavic languages (in this case, compare Ukrainian *pid skazaty*). Finally, let us take a look at the phrase *kumen tsu oysshpayen* ("to arrive late, at the end"). Once again, it is impossible to ascribe a straightforward lineage to German, despite the obvious morphology. *Oysshpayen* ("to spit out") refers to the old custom of spitting in order to ward off some evil happening, in this case referring to the *oleynu* prayer of thanks to God for not creating Jews as non-Jews. A synonym of this phrase is *kumen tsu oleynu* ("to arrive late") - *oleynu*, a Hebrew word, being one of the final prayers in the synagogue service. Since

language is unquestionably embedded in culture, dependence on etymology or linguistic lineage often reveals little about meaning.

Besides the daily functions of social intercourse, Yiddish served more specialized purposes throughout Ashkenazic Jewish history. One of these age-old uses was as the language of instruction. *Loshn koydesh* was the holy language of the traditional texts that were studied, and Yiddish was the mediator language for teaching the texts. Furthermore, rabbis generally explained their thoughts in Yiddish, but wrote them down and published them in Hebrew. Prayer was always in Hebrew. This type of societal division between high and low culture, sacred and profane, religious and secular, separated the uses of Hebrew and Yiddish. Similar divisions were found between Latin and European vernaculars, and classical and colloquial Arabic.

Throughout history there were attempts to raise the position of Yiddish in religious life. The main argument of the advocates of Yiddish was that to attain true religious belief the laws and prayers should be understood. Most people did not understand Hebrew, but everyone in the society understood Yiddish. Although up until today Hebrew and Aramaic have remained the exclusive languages of traditional religion, there have been exceptional situations in which Yiddish entered this domain. During the 14th and 15th centuries there are rare examples of the laws of traditional slaughter written in Yiddish. In 1526, a song in Yiddish appeared in a *Hagaddah* for Passover. During the same century *zmires* (Sabbath songs) and *tkhines* (special prayers for women) appeared in print in Yiddish. Another example of this uncommon trend was the appearance in the 18th century of a Yiddish translation of the *Zohar*, the major Jewish mystical text. In general, however, Yiddish remained the language of daily conversation, folklore and more secular texts.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, rapid secularization established new functions for Yiddish in Eastern Europe, the center of Jewish life until World War II. For example, in the arena of politics, in order to facilitate communication within the workers' movement, organizations such as the Jewish Labor Bund and various branches of the Zionist movement used Yiddish. They even proceeded to promote cultural endeavors, being convinced that this was the best way to raise the cultural awareness of Jewish workers. Daily Yiddish newspapers, first in the United States and then in Europe, started to appear. The press provided an outlet for Yiddish writers, who were part of a newly emerging literature, led by the classic

writers Shmuel-Yankev Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim), Sholem Rabinovitsh (Sholem Aleichem) and Yitskhok-Leybush Peretz. Although Yiddish had been the language of religious education, now for the first time full secular Yiddish schools were introduced, teaching an array of subjects such as physics and mathematics, as well as Yiddish culture itself. Cut in the bud by the Nazis, the excitement of new developments in theater, film, avant garde literature and progressive education never attained fruition.

## A Thousand Years Of Jewish Life Through Yiddish Literature

As a teacher of Yiddish language, literature and culture, I have been impressed with the desire of my students to understand the context in which Yiddish literature was created and read. My own ethnographic research on current day Jewish communities in the United States has also pointed to an everyday involvement of ordinary neighborhood residents as tellers of stories, usually narratives of life experiences, and as carriers of folklore — proverbs, jokes, recipes. Inspired by the title of an oral history project of Jewish immigrant life in Pittsburgh, *By Myself, I'm A Book!*, I have integrated the sophisticated, conscious literature of writers alongside theater, folklore and private letters and diaries. Yiddish literature spans the gamut of life activities and politics, from the reactionary to the radical, from the religious to the secular, from the public to the private.

The first written evidence of Yiddish is a single sentence that dates to the year 1272, written in a holiday prayer book from Worms. The rhymed blessing and salutation wishes the person who carries the book to synagogue a good day. Longer texts were found in the cache of documents discovered in Cairo which have illuminated our knowledge of medieval Jewish life. Known as the Cambridge Codex, these texts, which go back to 1382, include fables and biblical epics. All of them are written in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, another property that Yiddish shares with other written Jewish languages. Early Yiddish literature, although not much read and studied nowadays, exhibited a rich diversity of forms, including the popular *Tsene rene*, the retelling of biblical tales known as the woman's bible, which is read even today.

There were also biblical dramas, guides to ethical behavior and songs recounting historical events.

Although the mainstay of early Yiddish literature were the biblical dramas and epics, such as the *Shmuel bukh* (Book of Samuel - 1544)<sup>2</sup> and the *Melokhim bukh* (Book of Kings - 1543), as well as adaptations of Talmudic and midrashic tales (midrash - referring to literature that explains the biblical text), such as the *Mayse bukh* (1602), a secular literature also developed. For a short time, Yiddish seems to have flourished in the community of Ashkenazic immigrants in Northern Italy. Best known of the works published there was the *Bove bukh* (written 1507; published 1541), written by the Hebraic scholar and teacher of Christian humanists Elye Bokher (known in the Christian world as Elijah Levita). Adapting popular Italian stories for a Jewish audience, his original poetic renditions Judaized the content but left enough of the erotic romance of knights, kings and chivalry to entertain his readers. Despite the popularity of the book well into modern times (the title is thought to be the source of the phrase *bobe mayse* - "fantastic, unbelievable tale"), Yiddish literature was not receptive to the innovations of this author.

Alongside the secular romances, special prayers in Yiddish were transmitted across the generations orally and in printed collections. If we look at a *tkhine* (woman's prayer) for the holiday *simkhes toyre*, written by Rivke Tiktiner in the early 16th century, the expressed devotion to God and the exalting joy repeated in cries of *Hallelujah* are akin to the character of traditional Hebrew prayers. Another example of traditional Yiddish prayer is the recitation of "God of Abraham" at the end of the Sabbath by the woman of the house. When folklorists in the 20th century collected such prayers, the language was found to retain archaic forms, as would be expected in texts used for fixed phrase recitation. The plea to protect the family from evil and to sustain them with bread and good health is a moment of great drama in the Jewish family, which marks a critical hour in the week. This recitation is referred to in many literary creations. I am most touched by the poem by the American Yiddish poet H. Roiznblat that was set to music, in which a grandchild begs grandma not to say "God of Abraham" yet in an attempt to prolong the exhilaration and peace of the Sabbath.

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrew and Yiddish have no capital letters. By convention, names of Hebrew and Yiddish books are here written with only the first word capitalized. All other letters are written in lower case.

According to the broad definition of literature that I have set, namely, to include the literature that is alive in everyday life, the most widespread written forms are private letters and diaries. These are the undervalued documents that are destroyed, often by the authors themselves. The letters, besides revealing linguistic and stylistic conventions for this genre at any given time in history, indicate the nature of familial relations and reactions to historical events. From the same Cairo collection mentioned above, in a Yiddish letter from Jerusalem to Cairo in the mid-16th century we read of a widowed mother's affection for her son and his family. A better known collection of letters are the letters sent from Prague to Vienna in 1619. The messenger was intercepted in this period before the Thirty Years' War. The letters never reached their destination, but they were discovered in the imperial archives in Vienna and published in 1911. These letters provide us with a picture of everyday life of the Prague Jews of that time. A few of the letters were written in Hebrew and others contain traditional Hebrew letter writing formulae. Looking, for example, at one letter written by Henele to her sister, we read of the concern about local military battles, the danger of bodily harm in those unstable times, and the unwavering devotion to family. Even in the New World, Yiddish letters reveal some of the fabric of the lives of Jews, as, for example, in the correspondence of the Gratz brothers of Philadelphia in colonial times.

The memoirs of Glikl of Hameln, written between 1690 and 1720, and published in 1896, provide a valuable window on the concerns of a well established Jewish woman of the period in Central Europe. Seemingly conversant with Jewish sources, she relates folktales of midrashic origin (literature explaining the Biblical text) and uses language that is associated with the Jewish scholarly world. Besides teaching us Jewish history, such as the reactions to the false Messiah Sabbatei Zvi, we read an account that was designed for Glikl's children, full of moral and ethical lessons. Her concern with monetary matters, the financial position of people, and business affairs in general indicates the significant position of this woman in the family's economy. The reader gains great empathy for Glikl and her strength in facing the adversity of life's tribulations. Unique among documents that have survived, these memoirs have been ensconced in Yiddish literary history as well as in the study of European women's history of the late medieval period.

Glikl's ease in applying Yiddish proverbs at the appropriate occasion exemplifies a vital component of communication among Yiddish-speaking Jews. The performance of proverbs is an important part of the living world of Yiddish texts. In my fieldwork in the 1980s in South Philadelphia, a neighborhood of primary immigration, I found that proverbs were alive in the speech of even the least fluent Yiddish speakers. A few examples will illustrate this. I rarely observed Shmuel-Arn speaking Yiddish. He is an American-born child of immigrants who usually speaks English, but in describing his wife's poor health he exclaimed, "*Me vert krank shnel ober pameylekh gezint*" ("One becomes sick quickly, but healthy slowly"). Bemoaning the hooliganism in the neighborhood, he stated, "*Se darf vern git finster, biz se vert lekhtik*" ("It has to get very dark before it becomes light"). Dveyre, who arrived in Philadelphia from England as a baby, when describing how her sister-in-law interfered in her marriage, which eventually resulted in divorce, swiftly introduced the following proverb: "*Makh nit ken toyas, ir zolt veln visn eyn zakh, az vu tsvey mentshn shlofn af a kishn tor zikh ken driter nit mishn*" ("Don't make a mistake, you should know one thing, that where two people sleep on a pillow, a third shouldn't mix in"). The folk texts within the population live on, even when spontaneous conversation in the language has ceased.

Along with proverbs other commonly treasured and used folklore forms remain active in the population: stories, songs, jokes, curses and riddles. Young Jews today do not seem to be as avid storytellers as former generations; Yiddish folktales used to be told when Jews would congregate, over a glass of tea and as part of natural everyday conversation. Stories were transmitted from one generation to the next in Jewish families. I remember, for example, that my grandmother would tell me this popular rhymed children's tale:

*Amol iz geven a zhat mit a babe,  
Hobn zey gehat hindelekh rabe.  
Hobn di hindelekh geleygt eyer,  
Iz a kats gekumen un hot zey tsebrokhn.  
Der zhat veynt, di babe kvitshet,  
Der ployt shoklt zikh, un der toyer ritshet.*

(Once upon a time there was an old man and an old woman,  
And they had little grey chicks.  
So the chicks laid eggs,

There came a cat and broke them.  
The old man cries, the old woman screams,  
The fence shakes, and the gate wails.)

My grandmother, born in Radzin, Russian Poland, in 1890, emigrated to the United States in 1920 and told me this tale in the mid-20th century in the Bronx, New York, making me a link in a long line of transmission. Yiddish folklore provided elements, themes and models for various genres of popular written literature in the Middle Ages and continued to influence the rise of modern Yiddish belles lettres in the 19th century.

Many modern Yiddish literary creations are based on familiar tales and folk images. Some works consciously expressed insight into and sometimes advocacy of a specific Jewish psychological or political issue. As with all good literature, the best examples could at the same time appeal to the interests and aesthetic sensibilities of the rest of humankind. The definition of secular literature which I have invoked in this essay — interest in all the issues of Jews as human beings, spiritual and physical, cultural and political — guides my interpretation of Yiddish literature.

These overall concerns are expressed in a poem by Itzik Manger that champions Jewish peoplehood with all its frailties. Manger, the most popular Yiddish poet of the 20th century, is best known for his poetic renditions of biblical events, using the values of modern Yiddish culture. Written after World War II, his poem, "I Have Wandered for Years" epitomizes the Jewish dilemma. Coming to Israel, the poet declares,

For years I've wandered among strangers,  
Now I shall wander among my own ...

The state of being an outsider is an internal one, not solved by one's own state and land, according to Manger. Invoking the myth of the medieval poet and philosopher Yehudah Halevi, who declared that he would kiss the stones of Zion, Manger refuses to kiss the soil. His claim is that the land is not holy, but the people are holy; he is Israel, so how can he kiss himself? Thus, he defends the position of the Jewish folk, using the popular images of the Jew standing in thrice daily prayer, trading in *toyre un skhoyre* ("learning and goods"), and wandering in a permanent state of homelessness. The poem is a capstone that grows out of a thousand years of Jewish experience in



Ashkenaz, which is, in turn, supported by the long history of the Jewish people.

## The Development Of Yiddish Literature In The 19th Century

Yitskhok-Leybush Peretz can be considered the Yiddish literary figure of Eastern Europe who bridged the 19th and 20th centuries. At the time of his death in 1915, he was a popular cultural hero, but not much understood. This status remains until today. It is Peretz who encapsulated all the trends in 19th century literature and who propelled it into the future. It is difficult to comprehend that a writer who exhibited the most modernist tendencies would search back into the neglected history of Jewish folklife in order to collect Yiddish folksongs, oral lore and the tales of Hasidic rabbis. Influenced by both modern European literature and Jewish religious folk tradition, Peretz wrote new creations for his contemporaries. These trends could be seen in other Yiddish writers of the 19th century, but not highlighted in such contrast. The history of 19th century Yiddish literature is one of so much change and so much crossfertilization that it is difficult to tease out the strands. The three classic figures, Abramovitsh (1836-1917), Peretz (1852-1915), and Rabinovitsh (1859-1916) were contemporaries; yet even beyond the symbolic level they can be regarded as representing three separate but interlocking generations. The changes which took place within Yiddish literature in the 19th century occurred in other cultures over a period of hundreds of years.

In the development of Yiddish literary scholarship in the early 20th century, the first step taken was to study the older literature in order to establish a nationalistic pedigree. The second step was to analyze the 19th century to show the roots of a modern literature. The ideologies of the 20th century influenced the interpretation of the 19th century. Soviet Marxist scholars, for example, especially oriented against religious doctrine and administrative control of Jewish society, interpreted the rise of modern Yiddish literature in terms of a victory of the *Haskole* (Enlightenment) over Hasidism.<sup>3</sup> As the pendulum

<sup>3</sup> *Haskole* - Jewish Enlightenment, a religious, literary, cultural, and social movement starting in the 18th century designed to "modernize" the Jews of Europe. The movement, strongly influenced at the beginning by the German-Jewish scholar Moses Mendelssohn,

swings and the general tenor of life has become more traditional and religious today, the view of the contribution of Hasidism to Yiddish language and literature has become more appreciated. With this polarization prevailing in the view of 19th century Yiddish literature, a third trend, the continuation of an older popular *maysse-bikhl* (chapbook, small book of stories) tradition, has sometimes been overlooked. All in all, the 19th century remains the best studied period of Yiddish literature. By 1899, a time when Yiddish was still considered a jargon by most scholars and the existence of a unified entity called Yiddish literature was not recognized even by most Yiddish writers, Leo Wiener at Harvard University had already published in English *The History of Yiddish Literature in the 19th Century*.

One of the realms in which our knowledge is rather meager is the relationship between oral and written literature. In regard to Hasidism, for example, we are referring to Yiddish literature which arose in its oral form in the 18th century, the time of the Baal Shem Tov and Levi Yitskhok of Barditshev. In fact, Reb Nakhmen Bratslever, the most sophisticated storyteller, died in 1810. Certainly, the effect of Hasidic literature was felt before its appearance in printed form. Up until 1836, when the government closed Jewish presses in Russia, only three Hasidic works had appeared in Yiddish. In 1815, both *Shivkhey habesht* ("In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov") and *Sipurey mayses* ("Story Tales") by Bratslever were published in Yiddish. Both Hasidic works influenced the themes of future Yiddish literature. *Shivkhey habesht* represents the hagiographic genre, which is based on oral tales and glorifies Hasidic leaders. The original work contained popular stories which included known shtetl personalities. *Sipurey mayses* represents the religious, mystical tale. These are symbolic stories, often culled from Yiddish and non-Jewish folklore, and not focussing on Hasidic personalities.

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assumed divergent forms in Eastern and Western Europe. An adherent of the *Haskole* was a *Maskil* (plural *Maskilim*). *Hasidism* - movement of Jewish religious enthusiasts begun in Central Europe in the 18th century by Israel Baal Shem Tov. *Hasidism* became the dominant form of Jewish orthodoxy in large parts of Eastern Europe. Initially its primary opponent was rabbinic orthodoxy, but during the 19th century the movement was accommodated by more traditional Judaism. Both groups opposed the *Haskole*. An adherent of Hasidism was a *Hosid* (plural *Hasidim*).

Many details are recorded about the creation and transmission of the Bratslever tales. Five years before his death, Reb Nakhmen started telling the tales to his Hasidim. He wanted them to be recorded exactly as they were delivered. They circulated in written form until his death. Reb Nakhmen had wanted his stories to be published, but this was not achieved until his disciple Reb Nosn arranged for the publication. Reb Nosn in his youth had been a friend of Yisroel Aksenfeld, the later Maskilic writer (adherent of the East European Jewish Enlightenment). Reb Nosn, upon transcribing the tales, strived to remain faithful to Reb Nakhmen's original words, noting, for example, "*Dos iz nit ufgeshribn gevorn gut, azoy vi er hot dos dertseytl*" ("This was not recorded accurately as he had told it"). Reading Reb Nakhmen's stories was as important to Bratslever Hasidim as studying Torah. They were learned by heart and children were raised on them. The original printed edition was in Yiddish together with a Hebrew translation. Hasidic literature is a fertile area for researching the link between an oral genre and its written form, as well as the relation between published Yiddish and Hebrew texts. Certain Hebrew texts contain Yiddish phrases that the writer could not translate.

While Maskilim read and analyzed Hasidic works, Hasidim tried to burn all Maskilic works. Maskilim adapted scenes from Hasidic life and literature for satiric purposes, especially in the writings of Aksenfeld, Yitskhok Y. Linetski and Yoysef Perl. The main message of Maskilic literature was modernization of Jewish life through education. It is no surprise that they should have opposed the tremendous popularity of Hasidism.

In the 1830s Shloyme Etinger wrote a comedy, *Serkele*, which like all his other work was not published until after his death, and then only in a pirated edition without mentioning the author's name. The play portrayed a heroine who was demoralized by the distorted order of life in the shtetl. This was one of the most important works of 19th century Yiddish literature. Yet the significance of the work was not widely accepted until Max Weinreich's academic edition appeared in 1925. Satirical plays were, however, very popular. *Serkele* was first performed at the government rabbinical school in Zhitomir, six years after Etinger's death (1862), with Avrom Goldfaden, who would later found Yiddish professional theater, in the lead role. Etinger also wrote fables, epigrams and epitaphs, demonstrating the diversity of Maskilic Yiddish literature.

The trend in the 19th century that was most popular was the continuation of the *mayse-bikhl*, an old tradition in Yiddish literature. Old texts were reprinted well into the 20th century. In the 19th century, old tales were recast according to the lens of *muser* (moral edification). The conventions of this popular literature were so rigid that the newest contributions resembled old creations. Before the *mayse-bikhl* was adopted by Ayzik-Meyer Dik in 1855, Maskilim had already experimented with it, especially in developing the sea adventure story.

The continuation of the *mayse-bikhl* tradition as the most popular current points to the conclusion that it is an oversimplification to consider 19th century Yiddish literature simply as a creation of two conflicting ideologies of Hasidism and the *Haskole*. The demonstration of elaboration and stylistic differentiation reveals a rich and complex literature. For example, the minstrel and *badkhen* (traditional wedding entertainer) style was developed by Velvl Zhbarzher and the Singers of Brod, and culminated with Elyukem Tsunzer. Their creations ranged from lyrics on domestic issues to Maskilic satire and songs on a variety of social and political topics.

Yiddish as a literary language developed in all its forms. The popular vein, *mayse-bikhl*, was a receptacle for adaptations of canonized Hebrew and Aramaic texts, of Hebrew Maskilic writings, and of contemporary secular European works, all rendered in the Yiddish language. The impact of Hasidism on Yiddish was both psychological and linguistic. On the one hand the movement raised the prestige value of the language of the ordinary folk; on the other hand, it added the terminology of the style of prayer and the rebbe's sermon and story. The *Haskole* formulated the strongest arguments both for and against the Yiddish language. Perhaps the tensions between Yiddish and Hebrew in the *Haskole* could be best illustrated by the incident involving Lefin, Bik and Feder.

Mendl Lefin (Levin), the most prominent Polish student of Moses Mendelssohn, was a Talmud scholar who was also educated in science and knew German and French. He submitted a plan to the Polish parliament for public education for Jews in Polish in order to combat Hasidism. Initially, Lefin wrote in Hebrew, publishing translations of a French popular medicine book and of Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. In 1814, he published a Yiddish translation of the book of *Proverbs*, which aroused such a furor that Lefin did not publish his other translations. His rendering of *Ecclesiastes* appeared in 1873 (he had died in 1826), but his

translations of *Psalms*, *Job* and *Lamentations* have never been found. His *Proverbs* was revolutionary, different both visually and linguistically from previous Yiddish texts. He printed them in the four-sided letters up until then reserved for Hebrew, and in a folksy language which resembled the vernacular.

His major opponent was the Maskil Tuvye Feder, who believed in the maintenance of a beautiful Hebrew and German for writing. He circulated a long polemic in manuscript form, criticizing Lefin, another Maskil, for dirtying the German language. In a flowery Hebrew, Feder called for burning the book, since it reduced Jewish culture to the level of the peasantry. Even Maskilim who did not support Lefin's position considered Feder's attack to be in bad taste. Lefin's major defender was Shmuel Bik, a wealthy patron of the arts, who was also a supporter of Hasidism. His argument was multifaceted: first, that Yiddish has Jewish *yikhes* (pedigree), for it is the language of all the religious sages; secondly, in the non-Jewish world, other people publish in the vernacular to spread ethical thinking; thirdly, in terms of other languages, like Russian, English and German, they too consist of many components and are languages which became refined and modernized; lastly, Bik told Feder to act as cultivated people do, to argue like them, according to Western decorum.

These three personalities highlighted the diversity within the Maskilic camp, including various attitudes toward Yiddish. As to the constellation of languages advocated, we see that Lefin was for Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish, while Feder only had use for German and Hebrew. Throughout the 19th century, the various ways in which Yiddish was regarded were reflected in the names then still in use:

*taytsh* - translation  
*yudish-daytsh* - Jewish-German  
*loshn ashkenaz* - language of Germany  
*reyn daytsh* - pure German  
*zhargon* - jargon  
*prost yidish* - common Yiddish  
*yidish* - Yiddish

Starting with Abramovitsh in the 1860s, the prestige of Yiddish was raised further than ever before because the masters of modern Jewish belles lettres could sustain a commitment to Yiddish that was not possible in the time of Lefin. This was partly facilitated by the new Yiddish press, *Kol mevaser* (The Heralding Voice) started by

Aleksander Tsederboym (1862), who published, among other things, Abramovitsh's first Yiddish works and Yehoshua-Mordkhe Lifshits' defense of Yiddish. This publication demonstrated that there was both a ready audience and an array of authors. However, these ventures still reflected an ambivalence toward the language.

The Maskilim regarded Yiddish as an ugly language, but when they had to resort to Yiddish in order to spread European ideas which were foreign to the Jewish community, a fictitious *yidl* (little Jew) had to be created, a go-between who linked the sophisticated writer to the common reader. The most developed mediator was Mendele Moykher-Sforim. In order to communicate with the greater Jewish society, Abramovitsh had to split himself in two: the Odessa gentleman, Abramovitsh, and the old-fashioned bookpeddler, Mendele. Mendele is a character who can understand and be understood by the other characters in the novels. On another level, the Maskilim were also more ready to accept a Mendele who was different from Abramovitsh, just as his fictitious city Glupsk needed a Mendele in order to understand Abramovitsh's ideas. Mendele was not Abramovitsh's pseudonym, not a *folkstip* ("a common shtetl character"), but a complex dynamic figure. He remains an ambiguous character whose "progress" is not straightforward but moves from one equivocal stage to another. In the present essay, I have tried to argue that such is the general characterization of 19th century Yiddish literature.

There is a paradox in the Maskilic writers' attitude to Yiddish. They denigrated it, regarded it as an aberration, portrayed its speakers as stammerers, but only by means of it could they attain art. The culmination of this process was Abramovitsh's art, wherein he honed the language in repeated rewritings, helping to create a modern literary style. The Yiddish writers of the Haskole utilized fixed phrase folklore only in the speech of their negative characters. The writers' relationship with folklore was two-sided: criticism of the actual way of life, yet romanticizing Yiddish ethnography. Parallel to the ambivalence regarding the Yiddish language, the writers believed that the Jews had to shed their folklore in order to become liberated; yet their works are replete with exquisite portrayals of folk culture. Paradoxically, the idea developed that Jewish customs should be eliminated, yet preserved in memory and literature. In this issue too Abramovitsh distinguished himself by advocating that folklore is vital to the continuation of Jewish national existence. But it was only Peretz who, under the influence of the first Yiddish folklorists Ignats

Bernshateyn and Y.L. Cahan, collected folklore himself and adapted it to his writing.

The complicated relationship between Yiddish and Hebrew is also best illustrated with the case of Abramovitsh. In his first novel, *Limdu hetev* (Learn Well), written in Hebrew, he complains of the difficulty of writing about contemporary life in Hebrew, and his portrayal of lively dialogue is a literal translation from Yiddish. His second novel, *Dos kleyne mentshele* (The Little Man), was in Yiddish. In his autobiographical depiction of the switch, Abramovitsh describes his agitation and his moral and aesthetic uneasiness. Hebrew maintained its dignified and beautiful stereotype, while Yiddish would never shed its association with ugliness. Abramovitsh developed certain genres in Yiddish and others in Hebrew. One style influenced the other; his Yiddish contains reference to Hebrew sources, and his Hebrew uses idioms from spoken Yiddish. In the late 1880s Abramovitsh returned to Hebrew, not by merely translating his Yiddish novels, but by reworking them.

By the end of the century Yiddish had elaborated the genres of contemporary European literature. When reviewing the richness of the story of Yiddish literature in the 19th century, we see that in addition to the more newly acquired critical sensibilities, we must return to some of the generalizations of the earlier critics, such as *tsvey shprakhn, eyn literatur* ("two languages, one literature") and a *natsyonale literatur* ("national literature"). Despite the ambivalence toward language, the picture of the entire century is one of bilingual authors writing in Yiddish and Hebrew. Furthermore, if in the second half of the century some of the major Yiddish writers created in Polish and Russian, this phenomenon was sparse and secondary. Through all the tribulations and indirect pathways followed by this young modern literature, it served and shaped Jewish aesthetic and cultural needs. When a Yiddish-based nationalism first arose in the 20th century, its firmest foundation was 19th century Yiddish literature.

## Evolving Standards For Yiddish

Following the development of general standards for language within Ashkenazic society, we have seen that from diversity in Germany there arose a unity; this systematization was further ordered when different language varieties came into contact. Later developments in Yiddish in Eastern Europe exhibit modern dialects that represent uniformity that historically grew out of a greater diversity. Language standardization does not require committees, linguists, or even writers, but the existence of a speech community. The informal, unconscious standardization of a speech community is at the heart of language history. The evidence of world-wide Yiddish communication through the spoken and written medium for many generations points to the achievements of the speech community. A Jew from Amsterdam could communicate with a Jew from Odessa, as could a Jew from Montreal and Melbourne.

The concept *kulturshprakh* ("language of culture") refers to the goal of broadening the functions of a language to cover all realms of human activity and thought in a multitude of societal niches and institutions. I have described some of this expansion for Yiddish at the turn of the 20th century. The competing standards during the planning process of the Yiddish *kulturshprakh* can best be illustrated by Nokhem Shtif's guidelines in the Soviet Union in 1927. The ideal *kulturshprakh* was to apply to diverse situations such as newspapers, teacher conferences, the business office, translations and popular science books. Shtif offered three language styles from which to draw. The "living *folkshprakh*" ("folk language") was defined as both the living language of the older generations and the written language up to Sholem Aleichem, obviously a mixed bag. The "new literary language" was represented by his favorite writer, Dovid Bergelson. The "actual *kulturshprakh*" was the language of the press, and was generally rejected as a guide, since it was subject to too much foreign influence. The *folkshprakh* had its limitations, since it lacked terminology regarding contemporary technology and was laden with expressions of traditional religion. The literary language was too individualistic. Thus we see that no one source is used. Standardization and planning involves mixing and matching.

Although the multiplicity of institutions using Yiddish is usually identified with the 20th century, the standardizing effect of institutional usage must have been present starting from the first

societies in which Yiddish was spoken. We have already referred to literature both in its medieval and modern contexts. The spread of printed books could not but help evolve a language that could be understood by a wide audience. Developments in written language influence the spoken tongue. Oral folk literature helps spread regionally localized forms.

The Yiddish press, starting with *Kol mevaser*, was the harbinger of the new literature. Towards the end of the 19th century, dailies appeared in America, and then later in Europe. As compared with belles lettres, the press adopted new orthographic recommendations more slowly. In America and the Soviet Union, the press was the *kulturshprakh* locus that was most open to the influence of the majority language.

Although Yiddish was the mediator language for learning the sacred texts for centuries, it was not until the 20th century that full-fledged schools were founded in which all subjects, Jewish and general, were taught in Yiddish. In addition, in these secular schools, Yiddish itself, the language and literature, became a subject of focus. The ways in which older educational methods in Yiddish affected the general development of the language are hard to establish. We can assume that terminologies specific to *khumesh-taytsh* (the word-by-word technique of studying the Bible) and the language of *lernen* (Talmud study) influenced standardization.

In my opinion, aesthetic motivations, feelings for what is beautiful, are the strongest motivations behind the choice between two linguistic forms, even though other rationalizations are usually offered. In one situation, the quaint charm of traditional *folkshprakh* may prevail. On another occasion, the slick form of a technological neologism may seem appropriate. In the history of the development of modern Yiddish, aesthetic considerations cannot be avoided. Reference to a "pure German" versus a "dirty, bastardized jargon" speaks strongly for the role of aesthetic judgments. We must keep in mind, however, that aesthetic judgments change, and both speakers and writers relate to language emotionally.

## Toward The 21st Century

The rapid rise and decline of the culture of Yiddish-speaking Jews in the 20th century is difficult to fathom. It was only in the years before World War I that some Jewish intellectuals in Europe

formulated the ideology of Yiddishism, which foresaw that Yiddish language and culture would be sufficient to support Jewish group identity. The concomitant expansion of the stylistic diversity of the language and its function in new societal and cultural niches was a portent of a rich future for Yiddish. Acculturation to the dominant influences was not only the case for the lands of emigration, but in Eastern Europe as well migration to the cities and a general secularization of traditional small town life took place, especially between the wars. For example, young people in Warsaw, the major population center of Yiddish-speaking Jews, gravitated to Polish culture. This was happening at the same time that political youth movements and educational systems were introducing Jewish youth to new Jewish interpretations of socialism, Zionism, communism and religious life.

Yiddish theater matured during the early part of the century to offer a wide range of performance, from vaudeville, to light operetta, to serious drama. Yiddish film practically experienced its whole life between the wars. Daily newspapers flourished on both sides of the Atlantic. Literary experimentation was especially seen in poetry in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, Poland and the United States, with younger poets forming new literary groups. The last of these to form before World War II, *Yung vilne* (Young Vilna), provided post-War Yiddish literature with such leading writers as Avrom Sutskever and Khayim Grade. In the United States, it was obvious that even before World War II newspaper circulation, theater audiences and the readership of the experimental poets had begun to decline.

The major blow to Yiddish culture was the murder by the Nazis of six million European Jews, including a million children, most of whom were Yiddish speakers. Much of the Jewish experience during the destruction was chronicled in Yiddish, in belles lettres, diaries, memoirs, communal *yizker-bikher* (memorial books) and eyewitness testimony.

Following the war, Yiddish literary creativity was largely dominated by the Holocaust experience for the survivors as well as for those who had left their hometowns years earlier. The effect of this trauma on the hegemony of the surviving Ashkenazic Jewish culture has not yet been fully reckoned with. Before his death, Stalin murdered the leading Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union, the only large surviving Jewish community in Eastern Europe. Israel has become the major center for Yiddish literature, especially after the emigration of

many writers from the Soviet Union in the 1970s. The literary quarterly, *Di goldene keyt* (The Golden Chain), edited by Sutskever in Tel-Aviv, has been the major forum for Yiddish literature after World War II. At the present writing, a weekly press still functions, in addition to many other literary and political periodicals, including the oldest, *Di tsukunft* (The Future) published in New York, which celebrated its centenary in 1992.

During a period when the major language of Ashkenazic Jewry can claim fewer and fewer speakers, readers, writers and theater-goers, acceptance and recognition for the language and culture have increased, both within Jewish society and in the larger world. The most significant recognition of the achievements of Yiddish literature was the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Isaac Bashevis Singer, who wrote all his works in Yiddish. The author Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, wrote his first book *Night* in Yiddish and continues to publish in Yiddish. Instruction in Yiddish language and culture has been introduced in many universities across the globe. However, instruction in Yiddish for children is far more limited than in previous years: in certain Hasidic schools, a few day schools and supplementary schools in the Western Hemisphere and Australia, and as an elective in some Israeli schools.

Although children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe have recently shown an increased identification with the culture of their youth, intergenerational continuity is only observed in certain Hasidic communities in Brooklyn, New York and in Jerusalem. Ethnic communities that culturally isolate their youth in the United States, such as the Amish and the Hasidim, can exhibit language maintenance. The crucial institutions that guarantee continuity are the primary ones of day-to-day interaction, the family, the neighborhood, the synagogue. Books, journals, theater performances do not keep Yiddish alive over time if it is not spoken in the home.

In this essay I have tried to point to some of the contours of Yiddish language and culture. A knowledge of these is requisite for any understanding of the past thousand years of Jewish life. No one can predict the future reflexes of Yiddish. The prognosticators of the demise of Yiddish seem to be with us for as long as the language and culture have thrived and survived. The most appropriate symbol for Yiddish may, therefore, be that of the inextinguishable fire. In the words of the poet H. Leivik, "*Ikh bren un ikh bren un ikh ver nit farbren!*" ("I burn and I burn yet I am not extinguished").

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## Evolving Standards For Yiddish

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## Toward The Twenty-First Century

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