

The Jewish Future Needs Yiddish



AS MUSIC DIRECTOR for the Arbeter Ring (Workers Circle) network of schools and camps, Mikhl Gelbart wrote over 300 Yiddish songs, including songs for Purim, Passover, and everyday life. He was beloved by generations of students as a warm but demanding teacher. Gelbart died on December 20, 1962, exactly 60 years ago. You may not know his name, but one of his songs has endured in the wider world: If American Hanukkah can be said to have its own theme song, Gelbart’s “Ikh bin a kleyner dreydl” is surely it.

Of course, the song is much better known in its English translation as “The Dreydl Song” or “I Have a Little Dreydl,” with lyrics by Samuel Grossman. Grossman’s translation-adaptation appeared not long after Gelbart’s original. The exact timeline is still unclear, but one need only compare the two songs’ lyrics to comprehend which came first.

Here is Gelbart, with my own literal translation: *Ikh bin a kleyner*

dreydl/Gemakht bin ikh fun blay/To lomir ale shpiln/In dreydl eyns tsvey dray: “I am a little dreydl/Made out of lead/So let’s all play/Dreydl, one-two-three.”

Grossman’s translation-adaptation—“I have a little dreydl/I made it out of clay/And when it’s dry and ready/Oh dreydl I will play”—features two transitions, changing the meaning of the song in both subtle and dramatic ways. The song’s point of view is shifted from the dreydl itself to the child playing, while the dreydl’s material changes from lead to clay.

Cast lead was the most common material used for dreydls in Europe, a tradition that continued in the United States until molded plastic became cheap and ubiquitous. Dreydls are never made out of clay, except as inert ornaments: Clay ones aren’t balanced, and they wouldn’t survive regular use. Grossman’s dreydl is made from clay only because it rhymes with “play.”

The cast-lead dreydl was a perfectly self-contained toy: It was fairly easy to manufacture and then recycle for other purposes after the holiday. Its Yiddish instructions were engraved on its body: nun (*nisht*, or nothing), giml (*gants*, take the whole pot), hey (*halb*, take half the pot), and shin (*shtel*, put in). But in America, those Yiddish instructions have been replaced with the Hebrew slogan *nes gadol hayah sham*, a great miracle happened there. It’s a nice holiday sentiment but exasperatingly useless when no one can remember the rules of play.

Changing lead to clay also obscures how Yiddish culture was embedded in the larger culture in which its speakers lived. Unlike the clay dreydl of the American song, lead dreydls were material objects with a long European history, one that connects Jews to their neighbors. “Teetotum” and “trendel” were Latin and German names for spinning tops also used for games of chance, in which letters on each side also determined the outcome. It’s not clear when the teetotum arrived in Europe, but it may have been well over a thousand years ago. It was probably in Germany that the Jews first encountered it, under the name “trendel.”

The letters on the teetotum originally referred to Latin words

but were later adapted to new contexts. In England, the letters became T (take all), H (take half), N (take nothing) P (put in). The 1882 edition of *Cassell's Book of In-door Amusements, Card Games, and Fireside Fun* says that teetotums were used for a game called "Put and Take," with small stakes like nuts used for betting. It's no coincidence that *Cassell's* game sounds exactly like dreydl, for Jews were Europeans too and absorbed much of what their neighbors did. But they were also masters of cultural transformation, taking outside forms and putting them to Jewish uses.

All of this is buried by Samuel Grossman's one-word lyric change from "lead" to "clay." Of course, cultural change goes both ways: The American version also reveals an ocean of sociocultural transformation. The clay dreydl is a kind of golem of American Judaism, part of a powerful spell chanted endlessly by schoolchildren every year. It is an avatar of self-mystification on the part of American Jews, embodying the paradox of assimilation: the urge to forget in constant conflict with that which insists on being remembered.



But how much has been forgotten! A few years ago, I read Norbert Guterman's translation of Bella Chagall's beautiful Yiddish memoir, *Brenendike Likht*. In the chapter on Hanukkah, I was disappointed to see that he had chosen to use "teetotum" for what was obviously a dreydl. But when I went back to the Yiddish, there was no "dreydl" in sight: Bella Chagall calls it a "gor." I was perplexed. After doing some digging, I eventually came across an entry in Dovid Katz's atlas of Lithuanian Yiddish. He lists 16 different regional words for the thing we think of as "dreydl," including "beyndl," "varfl," and yes, "gor," in use in the Vitebsk area where Bella Chagall grew up.

I'm not suggesting that American Jews need to know that there are 16 different regional Yiddish terms for dreydl. But I am trying to illustrate the richness and variety of a Yiddish culture thoroughly obscure to almost all American Jews. The most basic competency in

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Yiddish, a language once spoken by 10 million Jews, somehow falls outside even the highest levels of Jewish literacy in America. The exception, of course, are those Haredi communities in America in which Yiddish is a first language. There are, in addition, "Yeshivish" communities of Orthodox Jews whose English incorporates traditional Yiddish terms, concepts, and even syntax. Of these two groups, however, the first live almost entirely in self-enclosed communities such as Williamsburg and Monsey; the second don't use Yiddish as a vernacular. Today, then, only formal language-learning experiences can transmit Yiddish culture in mainstream American-Jewish culture.

And yet, if you suggested that your local Jewish day school make Yiddish a standard element of the curriculum, you'd probably be laughed out of the room. More than a century of denigration, shame, and erasure of Yiddish language and culture have made it almost impossible to have such a conversation. But modern American Jewish culture was built, in large part, by Yiddish-speaking Jews and their descendants. That is an objective, descriptive statement. That we trivialize and diminish the language reveals how much we have internalized the immigrants' shame about their own culture and, by extension, about themselves.

This state of affairs is even more dramatic in Israel. Yiddish sits just beneath the surface of every modern Hebrew conversation: *Ma nishma?* How are you? —but literally, "What is heard?" —is a calque,

or direct translation of a phrase, in this case from the Yiddish, *vos hert zikh?* Similarly, *Lekh teda*, go figure, is literally, “go know,” a calque of *gey veys*. A whole culture is hidden in these ubiquitous calques. But they aren’t the only way Yiddish directly shaped modern Hebrew. Want to get down to *takhles*, to essentials? *Takhles* comes into modern Hebrew directly from Yiddish. How do we know? Like many words, *takhles* was brought into everyday Yiddish from Mishnaic Hebrew. When it finally came into modern Hebrew via that language’s first generations of “revivers,” its spelling preserved the Ashkenazic pronunciation, with a samekh at the end instead of a sof. Almost no one knows any of this. An Ashkenazi Israeli acquaintance recently told me she had always assumed *takhles* was an Arabic word! The marginalization of Yiddish in Israel, as well as America, is hard to overstate.

The examples cited above come from *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond* (2020), by a linguist named Ghil’ad Zuckermann. He argues that in order to properly understand modern Hebrew (which he calls “Israeli”), we must first accept the “founder principle,” which states that “Yiddish is a primary contributor to Israeli because it was the mother tongue of the vast majority of the revivalists and first pioneers” of modern Hebrew, and that all other languages are secondary in this regard except for classical Hebrew.

What if we accepted the proposition that Yiddish culture was not marginal, but integral, to American- as well as Israeli-Jewish identity? The implications are profound and certainly not limited to matters historic or linguistic. I could fill a book, but I’ll bring (to borrow another Yiddish locution) just one small example here.

Consider the story of my friend Alex Weiser, the director of Public Programs at YIVO, the premiere center for Yiddish research in New York City. He was a composer of modern chamber music who knew very little of Yiddish when he got the YIVO job in 2016. A few months later, he took YIVO’s famously intensive summer course. That sparked a passionate interest in the language. In 2019, he

released an album of new musical settings for Yiddish poems by modernist masters such as Avrom Sutzkever and Anna Margolin. That album, *and all the days were purple*, was a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in music.

I recently asked Alex why he set Yiddish poetry to music that doesn’t “sound Jewish” in the ways we might expect. Yiddish, he told me, is the key to thinking about what it means to be Jewish. “It opens up this wider world that is not just religion, not just national identity. It’s a different path, it can be complementary, it’s broader.” As Alex reminded me, composers such as Schubert and Schumann took up classic German poetry for their art songs. “If you’re Jewish and you want literary touchstones to deepen your sense of identity beyond what is easily available in mainstream Jewish or American culture, you get those things in Yiddish poetry, theater, novels. It’s a deeper sense of who you are as a Jew or who you can be.”



My own engagement with Yiddish has not merely enriched my life. I don’t know what kind of Jewish life I’d have at all, if not for Yiddish. Learning Yiddish made sense of my own life and family history. It gave me incredible community and endless creative material.

Many people assume Yiddishists are focused on movement in one direction, toward the past. But Yiddish culture isn’t simply some endpoint to be grasped and “preserved.” It is a vehicle by which we are always traveling between worlds, making discoveries, music, meaning, and, inevitably, remaking ourselves. The Yiddish cultural world, marginalized though it may be, has consistently been one of the most exciting centers of creativity and youth engagement in modern Jewish culture.

Over the past 40 years, thousands of young people have gone through programs at YIVO, the Yiddish Book Center, Klezkamp, Klezkanada, and other cultural festivals and events around the world. These young people are highly motivated and return to their

Jewish communities as leaders and innovators. Their participation is limited only by the very finite resources of most of these programs. And yet, the mainstream institutional world remains apathetic to the Yiddish world, if not outright hostile at times. I once heard a major Federation professional refer to Yiddish culture as an “off-ramp” away from Judaism!

How should the mainstream institutional Jewish world help Yiddish in America? Step one is to recognize that Yiddish and the people who are working with it are a crucial part of American Judaism. Step two, on the back of such a recognition: We must work toward making Yiddish part of the practice of mainstream American Jewry. For that, we need data. The next big population survey must gather data on language use and study. And step three is a commitment to making Yiddish available in Jewish schools. Such an initiative would require a serious investment in language teachers and resources. Yiddish culture is not an “off-ramp” away from Jewishness but a source of oxygen much needed by a living religion if it is to remain alive.

It’s a big ask. But the payoff would be immense. The Yiddish world would absolutely benefit from the support of the “mainstream” Jewish world. But the Yiddish world has even more to offer American Jews, in terms of knowledge, experience, and even leadership. Radical though it may seem to say so, American Jews need Yiddish more than Yiddish needs American Jews.



Composer Mikhl Gelbart himself is emblematic of everything gained and then lost in the sociocultural transformation from Europe to America. In his Yiddish-language memoir, *Fun Meshoyre-rim Lebn (Cantorial Choir Singers)*, published in 1942, Gelbart wrote about his childhood in Poland in the early 1900s. In a series of downright picaresque episodes, he describes being sent away from home and apprenticed to a cantor. He and the other boys in the

choir weren’t paid for their work, so they relied on tips to survive, supplemented by whatever else they could find.

The word “dreydl” comes up exactly once in Gelbart’s memoir, recalling the arrival of the gentleman who cast lead for that year’s dreydls. Presents were few and far between in his childhood, but that does nothing to diminish the obvious joy an adult Gelbart associated with that time. Perhaps that’s why he was so good at writing songs for children: He could still identify with them and their rambunctious ways. Either way, once settled in America, he quite literally helped invent the soundtrack to a new kind of Jewish childhood, one vastly different from his own.

In one final cultural transformation, however, Gelbart’s impact on American Jewish culture got written out of the record. In the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education songbook of 1950, for example, the author of the song “My Dreydl” is listed as S.S. Grossman, with no indication that it is a translation at all. Indeed, Gelbart barely makes the record in the English-language Jewish world, aside from two superb CD recordings of his songs by Yiddish educator Lori Cahan-Simon in the early 2000s.

Let’s write Mikhl Gelbart back into the story of American Judaism as one of the authors of its culture. Anyone looking at his body of work would find not just one very simple, very famous song, but hundreds of songs, as well as operettas, oratorios, and more. Half high art, half folk art, Gelbart’s example alone shows that Yiddish culture is far richer and offers far more than the narrowly nostalgic box in which American Jews usually place it. Gelbart passed away without any children to insist on his legacy for future generations.

On his 60th *yortsayt*, it seems appropriate to celebrate the continuing vitality of Jewish “folk” culture, the people who created it, and, of course, the man who made the dreydl a superstar. *