

The Jewish Culture and the Yiddish Language

For over a thousand years, the Yiddish language has been a central part of the identity of Jewish people throughout the world. Though this fascinating language has sometimes been derided by would-be oppressors as a “mongrel” tongue, in truth it is an amazing synthesis reflecting the rich cultural history and diversity of the Jewish people and has an especially deep connection to literature and theater. This article discusses the history of the Yiddish language, its use today, and its literary and theatrical works – there are even some sayings with common Yiddish words you can use yourself!

History of the Yiddish Language

Yiddish is a language traditionally spoken by the community of Ashkenazi Jews. Today, this generally refers to Jewish people in eastern European countries. However, both the Ashkenazi Jewish community and the Yiddish language have a common origin along the banks of the Rhine River in Germany. Yiddish first developed among Jewish immigrants from France and Italy who settled on the Rhine. Their common language had Germanic, Latin, Hebrew, and other elements. In the 1200s, Jewish families began to migrate eastward and the Yiddish language was exposed to Slavic influence. With time, the eastern forms of Yiddish spoken in Poland rose in importance and overtook the Yiddish of western Europe. Sadly, the horrific purges of Jews in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia led to a decline in the use of Yiddish, claiming the lives of many millions of its speakers.

[The History and Development of Yiddish](#): Illustrated, cited article about the history of the Yiddish language from ancient times to the present day.

[Yiddish Language and Culture](#): Cross-referenced article on the history of Yiddish, its literature, theater, and music, as well as the Yiddish alphabet.

[What is Yiddish?](#): Brief overview of Yiddish along with a great number of further Internet resources related to the Yiddish language.

Facts about Yiddish

Yiddish is still spoken in Jewish communities. It has remained important in providing common identity for Jewish people as it is considered appropriate for conversational and artistic use – in contrast to Hebrew, which was traditionally used mainly for religious and scholarly purposes. Today there are few who speak Yiddish as their main or only language, but it is still found in its ancestral homes in eastern Europe, such as Poland, Lithuania, and the former Soviet Union. Though the official language of modern Israel is Hebrew, the Yiddish language is also spoken there and greatly influences the theater. Yiddish is commonly heard in orthodox Jewish communities and among orthodox Jewish students of religion. In the U.S., the “capital” of Yiddish is New York City. Throughout the world, two to four million people speak Yiddish, including about 250,000 in the United States. The language is quickly gaining popularity as a topic of study for linguists who wish to investigate its ties to German and by cultural historians who consider it important to the arts, literature, and modern history.

[Yiddish on the Web](#): Index of resources centered on learning Yiddish, including bilingual texts, online courses, online dictionaries (some with sound!), various publications, and other destinations of interest.

[Internet Index of the Yiddish Language](#): Verified Internet links focusing on Yiddish culture and covering a variety of publications and biographical articles related to famous and important speakers of Yiddish in cultural history.

[National Yiddish Book Center](#): Nonprofit organization that supports the rescue of Yiddish literature and the expansion of Yiddish literacy. Also includes basic facts on the use and distribution of Yiddish.

Use of Yiddish in Literary Works

Yiddish has a very rich artistic tradition. It has been used to both create and translate many great works. In the early 1500s, the grammarian Elijah Levita became one of the first great authors to work in Yiddish. Elijah's vast body of works included poetry, great romances, commentaries on Hebrew scripture, and more. By the 1700s, Yiddish had become intertwined with ultra-orthodox strain called Hasidic Judaism, and was used in parables and biographical stories about holy and learned people. By the mid-1800s, classic authors wrote novels and other dramatic works in Yiddish. Authors like Sholem Yankev Abramovitch, Sholem Rabinovitch, and I. L. Peretz helped form the foundation of modern Yiddish literature. Their works established iconic characters like Tevye the dairyman and explored issues in Jewish life, identity, and history. In 1978, Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Polish-born Jewish author who worked in Yiddish, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Literary.

[The Art of Hasidic Storytelling](#): Variety of information on the practice of Hasidic storytelling, including actual Hasidic stories as well as detailed writings on the theory and history of this form of literature.

[Modern Yiddish Literature](#): Detailed, illustrated presentation on the development of, and major figures in, the modern body of Yiddish literature. Also includes some optional audio.

[Nobel Prize Biography of Isaac Bashevis Singer](#): Official overview of the author's life, including a thorough bibliography of his works in English.

Use of Yiddish in Theatrical Works

From the start, Yiddish has had a profound connection to the theater. Yiddish theater had humble beginnings in medieval Europe and often focused around the story of Esther, a tale told on the Hebrew festival of Purim. With time, Yiddish scholars began to translate famous plays, including Shakespearean works, sometimes making modifications of their own. Finally, in 1876, the Jewish playwright Avram Goldfaden cemented his place in theater history by writing the first secular Yiddish plays to be performed professionally. Yiddish theaters opened throughout eastern Europe, and Yiddish theater companies could be found as far west as London. Joseph Buloff, Avrom Morevsky, Ida Kaminska and others became famous for their emotional acting, and the melodramatic playwright Jacob Gordin built on Goldfaden's success. In America, the unlikely hero of Yiddish theater was Boris Thomashefsky, whose involvement in Yiddish theater in New York began when he was only 12 when he became producer and director of a Yiddish theater company that inspired others to perform in the Lower East Side, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. The "golden age" of Yiddish theater in America ran between 1890 and 1940, but in the decades since the Holocaust, Yiddish theater has experienced a resurgence centered in Tel Aviv, Israel, where it strongly influences an already very vibrant theater scene.

[All About Jewish Theater](#): Massive compendium of information about Jewish and Yiddish theatrical practice. Articles include citations, further reading, and Internet resources on each topic.

[Yiddish Theater in America](#): Brief overview of the historical development of Yiddish theater in the United States, focusing on the role of Boris Thomashefsky.

[Guide to Resources in Yiddish Theater](#): Bibliography of books, articles, and Internet sites on Yiddish theater compiled by Indiana University Bloomington.

Yiddish Sayings in the English Language

A large variety of Yiddish words can be found in American sayings and slang. Entire phrases in Yiddish are not usually known to those outside the community of Yiddish speakers, but a surprising number of Yiddish words are recognized and well-understood by many who have never had direct contact with the language in any other way. Here are a few phrases using those words, along with their meanings.

Chutzpah: Gumption, nerve, arrogance. Can be positive or negative.

“It took real chutzpah for shy Sally to show up at the talent show, but she did great!”

Kosher: Refers literally to “pure” foods allowed in orthodox Judaism, but can also be used to mean that something is wholesome or trustworthy.

“We weren’t sure the email offering a wire transfer from Nigeria was kosher.”

Klutz: A clumsy, accident-prone person- “The klutz ran into a chair and spilled his soup.”

Oy vey!: An exclamation of surprise, exasperation, or dismay.

“Oy vey! We were standing in line for half an hour after the klutz spilled his soup!”

Schtick: Usually refers to a performer’s act, specialty, or particular talent.

“Conan O’Brien always opens his show with that wacky monologue schtick.”

Schlep: To carry, to lug around a heavy, undesired burden, often needlessly.

“Len was tired after schlepping a satchel full of books around campus all day long.”

Schlock: Something cheap, tacky, junky, or worthless.

“It was hard to get out of the theme park without buying a schlock souvenir – there were stands everywhere!”

Schmooze: To make small talk; can also refer to flattering conversation.

“Every would-be screenwriter at the club wanted to schmooze with the Hollywood producer!”

Spiel: A long-winded talk or sales presentation.

“I had to listen to the telemarketer’s whole spiel for ten minutes before I even knew what he was selling!”

Tuckus: A mild term for your backside. - “The klutz fell on his tuckus after spilling his soup.”

[Selected Yiddish Words and Phrases](#): Index of common, basic, and important Yiddish words provided by the Israel Independence Day Festival Committee of Santa Barbara.

[Yiddish Sayings and Proverbs](#): Translations of various Yiddish aphorisms. Site also includes a Yiddish glossary with single words and pronunciation assistance. From Kehillat Israel, a Jewish congregation based in Lansing, Michigan.

[Key Yiddish and Hebrew Words and Phrases](#): Dictionary of important words in Yiddish and Hebrew, focusing on religious terms and basic conversational phrases.