

POSTVERNACULAR LANGUAGE & CULTURE

ADVENTURES IN  
**YIDDISHLAND**

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2006

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

## POSTVERNACULARITY, OR SPEAKING OF YIDDISH

"I'm writing a book about Yiddish after World War II," I tell a colleague, whom I've known for years, when she asks what I've been doing lately. "It's a sad story," she replies. The fact is, I don't quite agree with her, though I refrained from saying so then. Hers is a response I hear often, especially from people who, like this colleague, are a generation older than I am and are native speakers of Yiddish. Their sense of its trajectory is different from mine, and while I have developed my own understanding of Yiddish language and culture, it is still very much indebted to theirs.

Nor are they the only ones who see the story of Yiddish in declinist terms. More often than not, discussions of Yiddish culture terminate in 1939, 1948, or some other date, with any later phenomena involving the language either characterized as vestigial or simply not mentioned at all. There are, in fact, compelling reasons for thinking of Yiddish culture as having terminated at some point in the middle to late twentieth century—as a result of the Holocaust, the Stalinist liquidation of Soviet Yiddish culture, the establishment of Hebrew as the official language of the State of Israel, as well as large-scale voluntary abandonment of Yiddish among Jews integrating into the cultural mainstreams of the Americas and Western Europe. As a consequence of these events, there has been a precipitous drop in the use of Yiddish, both in public Jewish culture and in Jews' private lives. On the eve of World War II the world's Yiddish speakers were reckoned at around 11,000,000; at the turn of the twenty-first century estimates are sometimes well under 1,000,000.<sup>1</sup> The inventory

of current Yiddish books, newspapers, radio broadcasts, theatrical performances, children's schools, summer camps, and other cultural endeavors is a fraction of pre-war activity in the language.

Nevertheless, Yiddish has maintained a significant presence in Jewish life in the six decades since the end of World War II, albeit one quite different from that of the prewar era. Despite the great reduction in its use, there are still hundreds of thousands of Jews around the world who speak, read, or write it, at least some of the time, as a language of daily life. Yiddish also serves many others in different capacities—as a subject of study, as an inspiration for performers and their audiences, as a literature increasingly accessible through translation, as a selective vocabulary sprinkled through the speech of Jews and non-Jews, and as an object of affection.

Complicating the overall sense of Yiddish in decline are contemporary examples of linguistic maintenance and cultural creativity. Many *khareydīm* (ultra-Orthodox Jews) not only continue to employ Yiddish as a language of daily life, but they use it to generate new cultural works, including children's literature, popular songs, and plays performed on certain festivals. Some observers of *khareydīm* suggest that, as a result of their high birthrate and maintenance of a close-knit communitarian lifestyle, the number of Yiddish speakers has stabilized and may even be on the rise.<sup>2</sup> As a subject of humanistic scholarship, Yiddish language, literature, and culture have never before enjoyed the sustained support and extent of interest seen in recent decades, as Yiddish studies has become a presence in dozens of institutions of higher education in North America, Europe, and Israel. (For example, of the approximately two hundred doctoral dissertations and masters theses written in North American universities that deal in some way with Yiddish, about half were completed since 1990; only two were written before World War II.)

Similarly, the preservation of Yiddish culture has attracted considerable support, exemplified by the National Yiddish Book Center (NYBC) in Amherst, Massachusetts. Founded in 1980 as an effort to collect abandoned Yiddish books and make them available to a new generation of readers, the NYBC has become a widely supported and admired institution—hailed in 1997 by one enthusiast as “the most exciting new venture in American Jewish institutional life” in nearly half a century—and has expanded its agenda beyond preserving Yiddish books to a larger mission of “reviving Jewish life.”<sup>4</sup> Yiddish songs, folklore, and plays also currently enjoy a new popularity with audiences, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, at concerts and festivals held around the world. The interest in Yiddish among non-Jews—including scholars and performers in Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Japan, as well as throughout Eastern Europe and the Americas—is unprecedented in its range and scope.



**Newsstand in Boro Park, Brooklyn, New York City's largest hasidic neighborhood, 2002.**

Photograph by Stan Sherer. Courtesy of Stan Sherer.

Beyond evincing growth and innovation in the face of decline, these recent Yiddish cultural undertakings reveal a divergence between the reduced use of Yiddish as a vernacular, on the one hand, and the proliferation of other forms of engagement with the language on the other. Not only have the circumstances in which Yiddish is acquired, encountered, and employed changed profoundly in recent decades, but so have notions of what might constitute Yiddish culture. Before World War II it seemed self-evident that this culture comprised a range of activities—literature, the press, performing arts, pedagogy, scholarly research, political activism, and so on—produced in Yiddish by and for Jews who were fluent, native speakers of the language. Whatever modernist innovations this culture engaged, it did so with an understanding of Yiddish as the centuries-old vernacular that distinguished—and, for some, even defined—Ashkenazim (that is, members of the diaspora Jewish community originating in German lands during the Middle Ages).<sup>5</sup>

After World War II, however, these ready connections among language, culture, and people can no longer be assumed; their interrelation has changed in fundamen-

tal ways. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the notion of Yiddish as a contemporary Jewish language of daily life readily provokes fascination, incredulity, or amusement. For example, when New York City's Transit Authority programmed its MetroCard vending machines in 2004 to offer Yiddish as one of the language options at selected subway stations in Brooklyn neighborhoods with large Jewish populations, this development was reported in the local media, sometimes with piquant headlines ("Subway Learns Joy of Yiddish").<sup>6</sup> Other languages offered by these machines in various city neighborhoods—such as Greek, Korean, and Polish—received no such attention.

Moreover, Yiddish culture now has a sizeable constituency independent of a vernacular speech community. There are even many who profess a profound, genuine attachment to Yiddish who also admit that they don't really know the language; furthermore, they don't see their lack of fluency as interfering with their devotion. (In a recent mailing promoting its annual four-day gathering in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, the Charlotte Yiddish Institute enthuses about the previous year's event: "It was the love [of] and interest in Yiddish, not the ability to speak or understand it, which created maximum joy for participants.")<sup>7</sup> While this disparity between enthusiasm and mastery can prove confounding, even distressing, for some champions of the language who are fluent speakers, it needs to be considered as a distinctive cultural phenomenon in its own right.

Indeed, having an affective or ideological relationship with Yiddish without having command of the language epitomizes a larger trend in Yiddish culture in the post-Holocaust era. In semiotic terms, the language's primary level of signification—that is, its instrumental value as a vehicle for communicating information, opinions, feelings, ideas—is narrowing in scope. At the same time its secondary, or meta-level of signification—the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it—is expanding. This privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish over its primary level constitutes a distinctive mode of engagement with the language that I term *postvernacular* Yiddish. In the postvernacular mode, familiar cultural practices—reading, performing, studying, even speaking—are profoundly altered. Though it often appears to be the same as vernacular use, postvernacularity is in fact something fundamentally different in its nature and intent. And while it predates World War II, the postvernacular mode has had an increasing primacy in Yiddish culture since the war. Therefore, to understand the nature of Yiddish in recent years and to think about the possibilities of its future, the notion of postvernacularity is key.

Thus, during the past six decades, Yiddish hasn't simply dwindled, and it cer-



**Workmen's Circle event, New York, 1960s.**  
Courtesy of the Workmen's Circle/Arbeter Ring.

tainly hasn't died, although it is often characterized in such terms. Rather, Yiddish has become something significantly different from what it once was. The questions this book seeks to address are, just what is the nature of Yiddish at the turn of the millennium? In traversing the challenges of the past century or so, how have the language and its culture changed? And what does this transmigration reveal about the people who have engaged with Yiddish, both before the great breach in its history that occurred in the middle of the twentieth century and in the years since?

## YIDDISH SEMIOTICS

Before we examine the nature of contemporary Yiddish culture in detail, several key, general issues need to be addressed. To begin with, one of the defining features of this language is that from its beginnings in towns along the Rhine and Danube Rivers as early as the ninth century to its use by millions of Jews across Europe and in immigrant centers around the world by the early twentieth century, Yiddish has never stood alone. Its speakers have always been in contact with non-Jews—indeed, Yiddish, like all other diaspora Jewish languages, is a product of Jewish-gentile interaction—and have always been multilingual, understanding, speaking, sometimes reading and even writing one or more of their neighbors' languages. This contact has shaped the content and structure of Yiddish, as has Jews' traditional internal bilingualism. This entails, in addition to command of a Jewish vernacular, knowl-

edge of what Yiddish speakers term Loshn-koydesh—literally, the “language of holiness,” referring to the Hebrew and Aramaic of Jewish scripture, ritual, and rabbinic scholarship. Not only do the lexicon and grammar of Yiddish reflect this range of multilingual interaction, but Yiddish speakers often demonstrate a “heightened . . . consciousness” with regard to the language’s various components (Germanic, Romance, Semitic, Slavic) and its “hybrid or fusion nature.”<sup>8</sup>

The linguistically contingent status of Yiddish is epitomized by the earliest dated record of a Yiddish sentence, which appears in the Worms *makhter* (holiday prayer book) of 1272. This sentence—actually a rhymed couplet—is inscribed in lozenges embedded within larger letters spelling a Loshn-koydesh word. The Yiddish text appears to be in an embryonic state, dependent on the Loshn-koydesh that contains (and nurtures?) it. At the same time, the Yiddish words disrupt, and even seem on the verge of escaping from, their Loshn-koydesh womb, as they playfully voice a benediction that elaborates the value of the sacred text in which they appear in the language and behavior of everyday life: *Gut tak im betage / s’ver dis makhter in bes haktnes trage*: “A good day is given the man who bears / Into the synagogue this Book of Prayers.”<sup>9</sup>

As communities of Ashkenazim extended their geographic range over the centuries into an international diaspora, Yiddish has been situated in a series of multilingual constellations. Each of these entails a particular set of languages, in which their juxtaposition informs the significance of what is said or written in each one, beyond its primary semantic level of meaning. Literary scholar Benjamin Harshav terms this secondary, symbolic level of significance, which Yiddish always possesses as a result of never standing alone, the “semiotics of Yiddish.”<sup>10</sup>

Consider, for example, the long and complicated relationship between Yiddish and German. The two languages have a fundamental connection, given that Yiddish is a Germanic language (i.e., its Germanic component, related to various dialects of Middle High German, comprises the preponderance of its lexicon and grammar). The history of debating the origins of Yiddish is tied to competing theories about when (or even if) it can be properly regarded as a language separate from German.<sup>11</sup> The earliest speakers of what has come to be called Yiddish (they did not refer to it as such) were not merely vague regarding what it was they were speaking but apparently conceptualized language identity differently than would become the case in the modern era.

But by the Enlightenment the notion that Jews in German lands spoke something significantly different from their neighbors was evident to both Jews and non-Jews. In their pioneering scholarship on language and culture, Johann Gottfried von Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt defined Jews as outsiders—on linguistic, cul-

tural and, what would eventually be termed racial, grounds—in relation to the nascent idea of German nationhood. In this context, notes literary scholar Jeffrey Grossman, Yiddish “came to function as a synecdoche for the otherness of Jewish culture, language, traditions, and society.” By resisting assimilation into a homogenous nation, Yiddish speakers—and the language itself—came to be regarded as “a disruptive, disordering, or anarchic element in German culture.”<sup>12</sup>

German Jews more famously became pioneers of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment movement), epitomized by the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Although he spoke and wrote Yiddish, Mendelssohn disparaged it as an impure language that lacked beauty and coherence. In what became the predominant view of the Haskalah, not only did Yiddish, as a means of communication, hinder its speakers, but it had perforce a morally deleterious influence on them. The language, notes historian Steven Aschheim, “became synonymous with *Unbildung* [lack of cultivation], [the] counter-example of what the new German Jew had to become.”<sup>13</sup> Abandoning Yiddish for German soon stood as a hallmark of enlightened, integrationist German Jews. Consequently, the extent to which traces of Yiddish lingered among them ineluctably became a focus of modern German anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred. The instrument of comic mockery of German Jews, Yiddish was also perceived more ominously as the Jews’ covert language. As cultural historian Sander Gilman has noted, this notion had telling ideological implications: “Even if Jews could speak perfect grammatical, syntactic, and semantic German, their rhetoric revealed them as Jews.” Such an understanding of Yiddish as an insidious cultural force would eventually inform Nazi anti-Semitism. The Nazis’ “racial linguistics was a continuation of the long tradition of viewing the Jews’ discourse as polluted” and, therefore, as a threat to the cultural health of Germans.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, Yiddish writers in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe often turned to German as a model for refining their language into a proper vehicle for modern literary expression. (Indeed, the German model of vernacular language as providing “those modes of shared sensibility from which a nation-state could evolve” was paradigmatic for East European Jews and non-Jews alike as they sought to articulate nationalist identities in the nineteenth century.)<sup>15</sup> The prolific Yiddish writer Isaac Meir Dik, for example, who wrote hundreds of titles published from the 1840s to the 1890s, would, in the course of his narratives, render traditional Yiddish terms and phrases, mostly from the language’s Loshn-koydesh component, into modern German equivalents.<sup>16</sup>

Later authors and champions of Yiddish stigmatized such practice as *daytshtimerish*, an overreliance on literary German. In the early decades of the twentieth cen-

tury, notes linguist Christopher Hutton, debating *daytshmerish* came to symbolize pro-Yiddish activists' efforts "to assert the identity of Yiddish as an autonomous linguistic entity."<sup>17</sup> For some engaged in creating standards for Yiddish as a *kulturshprakh* (language of "high" culture), *vos vayer fun daytsh* (the further from German [the better]) became an ideological as well as an instrumental watchword.

Such concerns were soon overwhelmed by the Nazi era's transformation of German-Jewish relations throughout Europe into a life-and-death struggle. During the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath, some Jews assailed German as the epitome of "Aryan" savagery, just as they saw Yiddish as a metonym for the millions of Jewish victims. In a poem he wrote during World War II, the American Yiddish poet Yankev Glatshteyn voiced his outrage at Germany's mass murder of European Jewry by ascribing to Yiddish and German contrary moral characters and by despairing that the civility and creativity of "our well-kept tongue" had been rendered speechless by the savagery of "your *Blutwurst Sprache* [blood sausage language]."<sup>18</sup>

More recently, the affinity of the two languages has fostered new appreciation—albeit circumspectly, given their fraught history. For example, when young American musicians involved in the klezmer revival began performing in Germany in the 1980s, they soon discovered that they could sing and speak to audiences there in Yiddish without providing the extensive translation that their (often largely Jewish) audiences in the United States usually required. Before long, young German musicians took up playing klezmer and performing Yiddish songs themselves.<sup>19</sup>

The liner notes to the 1993 recording *Beyond the Pale* by the klezmer band Brave Old World address the complicated challenge of performing in Germany, noting archly that there "the population speaks a corrupted Yiddish, which they write in the alphabet of Christians." In his lyrics to the album's concluding song, "Berlin 1990," band member Michael Alpert articulates both the uneasiness and the attraction generated by the encounter of American-born Jewish klezmer musicians with Germans, especially their youth, during that nation's dramatic transformation:

*Nor nokh alts, oy, farbindn zikh  
undzere tsvey felker,  
a farbotene libe, fun reshaim geshert,  
Tsi libe, tsi sine,  
Zi hersht vi bashert.*

Yet something still draws together  
Our two peoples;



Cover of the premiere recording of Huijet (Yiddish for "carouse"), a klezmer band based in Nuremberg, Germany, 2000. The text of the accompanying booklet begins: "Sind Sie Jude?—Nein?—Und warum machen Sie dann Klezmer?" (Are you a Jew? No? Then why do you play klezmer?)

Courtesy of Huijet.

A forbidden love, disrupted by evildoers,  
Be it love or hate,  
It is as if fated.<sup>20</sup>

During the past century, Yiddish has taken on very different symbolic meanings within the multilingual constellation of the Jewish settlement in Palestine and, since 1948, the State of Israel. There Yiddish is juxtaposed against modern Hebrew, the official national language and now prevailing Jewish vernacular, as the traditional Jewish language of diaspora.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Yiddish has become emblematic of a way of life rejected and superceded by Zionism.<sup>22</sup> There is a considerable history of Zionist derision and even persecution of Yiddish in the pre-State era, which continued for years after the State of Israel was established. In Palestine under British mandate rule, Hebraists denounced Yiddish as a language lacking in linguistic, cultural, or social integrity (a discourse similar, and to an extent indebted, to the German assault on Yiddish) and indelibly marked with the stigma of exile. They occasionally vandalized Yiddish printing presses and torched newspapers that sold Yiddish newspapers.<sup>23</sup> And in 1930 a screening of an early Yiddish "talkie" in Tel Aviv provoked some in the audience to spatter the screen with ink and to hurl "foul-smelling objects" in protest, leading to arrests by British police. The film was later screened "after cutting out the talking and singing parts"—in

effect, quelling what was denounced as “the deliberate impertinence of a jargon [i.e., Yiddish] performance.”<sup>24</sup>

Official policy in Israel has consistently denied the value of Yiddish as a Jewish vernacular within its borders (although Ashkenazim have spoken Yiddish in the region for centuries).<sup>25</sup> During the war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, for example, the Israeli government refused to translate the proceedings into Yiddish or to offer daily press briefings in the language (these were made available in English, French, and German), despite the extensive international Yiddish press covering the event. Israeli officials argued that “Yiddish journalists ought to know Hebrew” and that they “can translate on their own from the other languages,” like the Yugoslavian or Polish journalists covering the trial.<sup>26</sup> State-run institutions have occasionally accorded Yiddish an emblematic, vestigial status, especially in connection with the Nazi destruction of European Jewry. Thus, signage in the original museum at Yad Vashem, which opened in Israel’s official Holocaust memorial complex in 1973, identified sections of its exhibition chronicling Nazi Germany’s persecution of European Jewry in Yiddish and English as well as Hebrew (the building’s emergency exits, however, were marked only in Hebrew and English).

Recently in Israel, Yiddish has received more beneficent official recognition as an important resource of Jewish heritage. In January 1993 the Knesset convened a special session dedicated to Yiddish language and culture. This homage to Yiddish, “after years of denial and negation” on the part of the state, included speeches by Knesset members Abraham Burg, Ovadia Eli, Dov Shilansky, and Shevah Weiss, among others, who “spoke in praise of Yiddish and expressed their love for it.” Complicating this official demonstration of respect were the diverging perspectives it offered on the language. Whereas Shilansky “spoke with great emotion of the Yiddish language and its beauty, clinging to the memory of the past,” offering what amounted to a eulogy for the language, Minister of Education and Culture Shulamit Aloni declared, “It is too early to mourn over the Yiddish language. It is necessary to cultivate it. . . . Its riches must not be lost.” One feature common to all the speakers at this event was that they made their remarks in Hebrew.<sup>27</sup>

Juxtaposed against official state attitudes toward Yiddish, whether negative or positive, folkloric evidence demonstrates how alternative valuations of Yiddish in Israel have persisted informally. For example, in his celebratory volume *The Joys of Yiddish*, published in the United States in 1968, Leo Rosten included the following joke: “On a bus in Tel Aviv, a mother was talking animatedly, in Yiddish, to her little boy—who kept answering her in Hebrew. And each time the mother said, ‘No,

no, talk Yiddish!’ An impatient Israeli, overhearing this, exclaimed, ‘Lady, why do you insist the boy talk Yiddish instead of Hebrew?’ Replied the mother, ‘I don’t want him to forget he’s a Jew.’”<sup>28</sup>

The state’s official equating of Hebrew, Israeli, and Jewish identities is also refracted through the prism of Yiddish in another joke, which explains that the Hebrew word *b’diyuk* (“precisely,” as in *b’sheva v’hetsi b’diyuk*, “at precisely 7:30”) is really an acronym for *bi’z di yidn veln kumen* (Yiddish for “until the Jews come”).<sup>29</sup> In this bit of comic wordplay Yiddish offers a linguistic undoing of Hebrew meaning and signifies the cultural subversion of a precise, standard time by a subjective, alternative “Jewish time.” Or consider the phenomenon of Arab dealers in second-hand goods who troll the streets of Israeli cities in horse-drawn wagons, shouting “*Alte zakhn, alte zakhn, alte zakhn!*” (Yiddish for “old clothes”). Here, Yiddish persists in Israel as a token of exile, signifying an archetypal Jewish profession of the European diaspora, though it has been mapped onto a different people and thereby configures them as local emblems of a way of life that Israeli Jews have left behind.

There may also be a new generational divide in Israeli attitudes toward Yiddish, according to journalist Efrat Shalom, reporting in 2003 on younger Israelis who are drawn to Yiddish as part of a larger reclaiming of “Ashkenazism.” Among these is author Nir Baram, who compares the fate of Yiddish under Zionism with that of Mizrahi (“Oriental,” i.e., non-European diaspora Jewish) culture: “Unlike the Mizrahi culture, which was clearly oppressed, the Zionist Ashkenazim murdered their own culture with their own hands. . . . Ironically, it’s the Mizrahi campaign [to assert its distinctive diaspora cultures within Israel] that is leading the cultural liberation of the Ashkenazim.” Shalom notes that Baram’s thesis angered older Israelis, who, in Baram’s words, “felt the need to defend the basic Zionist narrative.” In Israel, he maintains, “the Ashkenazim were the first to wipe out their past. Now, my generation wants to continue the historical continuum.”<sup>30</sup>

## YIDDISH ON TRIAL

Within any given constellation of languages the choice to speak, write, or perform in Yiddish (or to refrain from doing so) has always been invested with meaning, beyond the content of what is actually being uttered. (For instance, a live recording of a recital in the United States by cantor Moshe Koussevitzky begins with him announcing in English that he will sing the aria “Rachel, quand du Seigneur” from Jacques Fromental Halévy’s opera *La Juive*. “In Yiddish,” Koussevitzky adds, after a pause, and the audience stirs with laughter, then applause.)<sup>31</sup> While this added



semiotic value has always been present in the history of Yiddish, it became especially charged following the advent of the Haskalah. Until this period, notes linguist Max Weinreich, Ashkenazim “were attached to Yiddish not by a formulated ideology, but because it was their own indigenous possession.”<sup>32</sup> Thereafter, however, a modern consciousness about Yiddish evolved, responsive to new scrutiny of the paradigms and contingencies defining Jewishness, and the significance of Yiddish in Jewish life could no longer be regarded as self-evident. The language became the subject of extensive public discussion, as established patterns of Ashkenazic multiglossia gave way to a much more open and contentious configuration of language use. This was especially the case in Eastern Europe, home since the eighteenth century to a Jewish population of unprecedented size.

As Harshav notes, the symbolic meaning of Yiddish was dramatically transformed during the “modern Jewish revolution”—the abrupt, intense, and multivalent response of East European Jews to the waves of anti-Semitic violence and punitive legislation that followed the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. Constituting “a major watershed in the history of Jewish culture and consciousness,” this response was anything but uniform, but its impact was “so immense that [it] undermined all certainties of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe,”<sup>33</sup> compelling millions to question every aspect of Jewish life, from what constitutes a proper sociopolitical vision of Jews as a people to how a Jew should eat, dress, and talk. The question of language was vital to this revolution, linking its national and personal dimensions; the choice of proper language(s) for the modern Jew—with possibilities that included Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, English, and Esperanto, among others (and combinations thereof)—was one of the most widely and passionately debated issues of the period.

From the late 1800s until the end of World War II the discourse about Yiddish ranged widely, from ardent advocacy to equally passionate repudiation. A common assumption in this discussion, regardless of the esteem accorded to the language, was that there were millions of Jews, the majority of the world’s Jewish population, whose first language was Yiddish more or less by dint of birth. Hence, for the foreseeable future there would continue to be a sizeable population of Yiddish speakers—most of them living in Eastern Europe, where they had made their home for centuries, along with significant immigrant communities established in Western Europe and the Americas. This was an unprecedented phenomenon in Jewish history: never before (or since) have so many Jews, and such a widely dispersed preponderance of their world population, been united by their knowledge of a Jewish vernacular. Indeed, it was this large population of native speakers of Yiddish (more,

on the eve of World War II, than there were native speakers of, say, Czech, Dutch, or Greek) that provided the foundation for Yiddishism.<sup>34</sup> The ideology—or, rather, cluster of ideologies—of Yiddishism centered on the notion that Yiddish, as a *folkshprakh* (a Yiddish term for “vernacular language,” literally, “the people’s language”), was an essential, definitional feature of a modern Jewish nation.

Conversely, the great extent of this vernacular community also prompted vehement attacks on Yiddish. These came from Jews who championed Hebrew as their modern vernacular or who advocated linguistic assimilation into German, Russian, Polish, or another major national language. Other Jews assailed Yiddish as the instrument of a pernicious ideology, be it hasidism, communism, or Jewish nationalism. Although this may be a difficult notion to grasp from our current perspective, since Yiddish seems to be, if anything, endangered rather than dangerous, defending the language from attack by both Jews and non-Jews was a constant of modern Yiddish culture in its heyday. At the end of the nineteenth century the philologist Leo Wiener observed that “there is probably no other language in existence on which so much opprobrium has been heaped.”<sup>35</sup>

As Wiener wrote these words in his landmark study of modern Yiddish literature, this new culture was burgeoning in the face of extensive state restriction. The majority of the world’s Yiddish speakers then lived in the Russian Empire, where they had been forbidden to run modern schools or perform plays in Yiddish, since these were suspected of serving as vehicles of sedition. Under czarist rule, Jews seeking to issue books and periodicals were subject to state censorship (as was all publishing in Russia), and they had to comply with specific constraints on the operation of Jewish presses.<sup>36</sup>

Although World War I brought an end to these restrictions, East European Yiddish speakers encountered both new obstacles and unprecedented opportunities in the interwar years. Provisions in the Versailles Treaty stipulated that minorities in Eastern Europe’s new republics, including Jews, would be afforded considerable cultural autonomy. These provisions included the right to establish trade unions, political parties, schools, presses, and cultural institutions run in their own languages. However, efforts to implement Yiddish in public culture met with frequent government resistance, including in the Polish Republic, home to the largest Jewish population in interwar Europe.<sup>37</sup>

During the 1930s, state-endorsed and -supported Yiddish cultural institutions that had been established in Soviet Russia in the previous decade came under increasingly oppressive governmental control, sometimes at the hands of fellow Jews in leadership positions in the Russian Communist Party. Following World War II,



**און ער הערש זיי דעם קאמער און לעבס!**



(צווישן די צייטן פון אונזער שולדן אין פאליטישע ארמייס)

"And he pays them no heed and lives!" This cartoon by Zuni Maud was published in the American Yiddish humor magazine *Der groyser kundes* (The Big Prankster) in 1921. The boy, with a hat labeled "Yiddish" and a book labeled "Jewish History," strides past adults representing Hebrew, French, English, German, Spanish, Russian, and Polish, who say, "He won't amount to anything; his sort can't survive." In the background, ghosts haunt the tombstones of Chaldean, Latin, and Aramaic.

leading figures of Soviet Yiddish culture were arrested and later executed for their involvement in efforts that had come to be denounced as acts of anti-Soviet nationalism and treason. Prominent Yiddish writers who were among the defendants in the 1952 secret trial of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were coerced into renouncing their life's work as interfering with Jewish assimilation into the Soviet mainstream. At one point during the proceedings the principal defendant, Solomon Lozovsky, observed: "What is on trial here is the Yiddish language."<sup>38</sup>

During the Holocaust, Yiddish became a powerful signifier of an exigent, ineluctable Jewishness in the struggle for survival. Writing in Vilna in the spring of 1940, educator Chaim Kazdan exhorted fellow Yiddishists to respond to an urgent need for reading material by fellow Jews caught in the upheavals of war:

Those who are already familiar with Yiddish literature as well as those who have only just now come to Yiddish and all forms of Yiddish secular culture—those among the refugees [from western Poland] who have only just begun speaking Yiddish and are trying to integrate themselves into the Yiddish milieu—are all seeking companionship in the Yiddish book. . . . Now more than ever our literature is called upon to strengthen the spirit, to solidify the masses, to raise the level of culture in our environment.<sup>39</sup>

From our postwar perspective it is apparent that, just as the atrocities that awaited Europe's Jews during World War II were beyond their imagination, Yiddish speakers could not fathom the devastating effect that the Holocaust would have on the language and its culture. Writing in the *Jewish Daily Forward* at the end of 1941, weeks after the United States' entry into the war, Max Weinreich considered its consequences for Yiddish. While anticipating that the language would reflect the "terrible upheavals" of the war, he situated this notion within the larger historical dynamic of Yiddish and remarked that, in general, "languages are always changing, especially in extraordinary times." Noting that predictions, positive as well as negative, of the impact World War I would have on Yiddish had all proved to be inaccurate, Weinreich refused to speculate about the particular consequences of the current war. "It will be a completely different world," he observed. "Jews fleeing demolished areas will encounter one another, and many Jews will immigrate to new places."<sup>40</sup> Though he resisted forecasting the nature of postwar Yiddish, Weinreich appears to have anticipated that the impact of World War II on the language and its speakers would be similar in scope to that of the previous war. The upheavals of warfare would disrupt usage but would also result in reconfigurations with the potential to foster linguistic and cultural innovations. The enduring viability of Yiddish and of its core community of speakers in Europe, however, was beyond questioning.

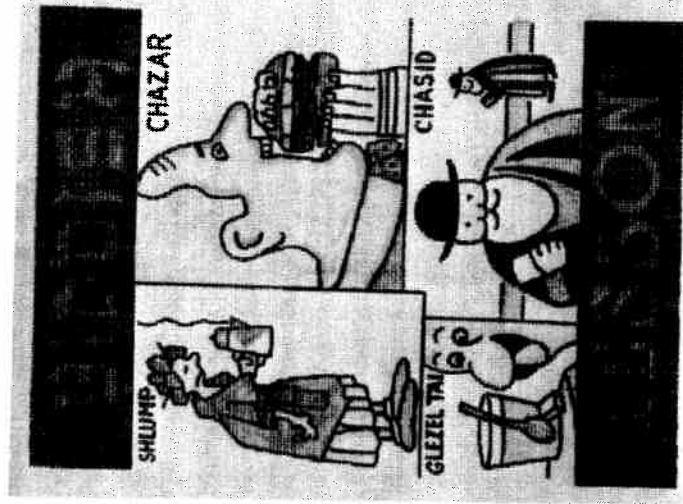
**YIDDISH AS MARTYR**

With the revelations of the Holocaust this assumption was abruptly and cruelly undone. The great majority of Jews murdered during World War II spoke Yiddish; within less than a decade the number of Yiddish speakers in the world had been cut in half. Along with the extensive loss of life came the widespread destruction of Jewish communal infrastructure in Eastern Europe, compounded by its regulation

or liquidation at the hands of various postwar communist-bloc governments. Yiddish proved to be newly problematic for East European Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. In the late 1940s an American visitor to Poland reported that “Jews were afraid to speak Yiddish in public” and that they were told “it was ‘inadvisable’ for Jews to provoke Poles by speaking Yiddish on the public streets.”<sup>41</sup> What had been the central locus of Yiddish culture for half a millennium was now perceived as a haunting void. Recent immigrant communities, most only one or two generations old, regarded before the war as adventive outposts of Yiddish culture, now bore the onus of its endurance.

As but one consequence of this catastrophic loss of life and sudden reconfiguration of Jewish demographic and cultural centers, the significance of Yiddish was radically altered. In addition to new multilingual constellations in which Yiddish speakers found themselves (such as the arrival of a sizeable postwar community in Australia), the situation of Yiddish in existing milieus was transformed. This was especially true in the United States, where Jews—most of whom were Yiddish-speaking immigrants or their descendants—suddenly confronted the fact that they were not only the world’s largest and most prosperous Jewish community but also its most continuous and, albeit by default, its most authoritative one. As historian Jonathan Sarna writes, “Whereas before [World War II], the Jews of Europe represented the demographic and cultural center of world Jewry, now that designation fell to America.”<sup>42</sup>

The signal changes of life in postwar America—large-scale embourgeoisement, internal migration from cities to suburbs, expanded access to higher education—had a profound impact on the nation’s Jews. These and other factors contributed to a paradigmatic shift in their sense of self, which sociologist Nathan Glazer characterized in 1957 as a move from Jewishness (i.e., Jews understood as an ethnic group—or, as Glazer termed it, “secular culture and quasi-national feeling”) to Judaism (Jews defined as a religious community).<sup>43</sup> The postwar years also witnessed a widespread desire on the part of American Jews to be seen, by other Americans as well as by themselves, as well integrated into the national cultural mainstream. For many American Jews during the early postwar years, Yiddish was an embarrassing vestige of immigrant difference. With the onset of the Cold War, the antireligious stance and left-wing associations of many secular Yiddishists came to be seen as especially problematic. The establishment of the State of Israel also fostered a surge in American Jews’ interest in studying modern Hebrew. These changing circumstances and perspectives contributed to postwar American Jews’ extensive abandonment of Yiddish as a vernacular. At the same time, these developments prompted a new self-consciousness about the loss of the language.



Needlepoint canvas by Deco Point, Inc., 1959. The words taught in this “Yiddish Lesson” exemplify the wide symbolic range of Yiddish in postwar America: as a signifier of piety and sentiment, on the one hand, and of excess and disparagement on the other.

The neglect of Yiddish became a topic of interest in itself, notably in works of American Jewish literature and in humor that played with the disparity between different generations’ knowledge of the language. In 1946 humorist Sammy Levenson published “A Guide to Basic Yiddish,” one of the earliest mock Yiddish-English dictionaries (a genre that would proliferate in ensuing decades). Levenson prefaced this inventory of selected Yiddish terms with comic glosses (e.g., “YONTEFDIK [fessive:] Tight shoes”; “KOVED [honor:] Allowing the other guy to pay the check”) by explaining:

[Today’s] grandchildren speak very little Yiddish. Generally speaking, they know less of Yiddish than their grandparents knew of English. This dictionary contains remnants of grandpa’s Yiddish which still circulate among the younger generation of American-Jews. They are retained because they are sweet and colorful. They are richly idiomatic and “hit the spot.” Besides, many of us have a sentimental attachment for them as for grandpa’s candlesticks or grandpa’s old watch. They “belonged” to our people. They are precious because the places like

Jewish Poland where people used them most as their very own are fewer and the people who sang to their children in Yiddish and worked in Yiddish and made love in Yiddish are nearly all gone.<sup>44</sup>

This trope of recounting the decline of Yiddish in postwar America as an ambivalent sign of cultural loss has continued through the turn of the millennium. In 2000 *New York Times* columnist Clyde Haberman observed that while “a fair amount of Yiddish . . . has become mainstream in America, . . . the Yiddish that Americans tend to know (most Jews included) consists of only a word here, a word there, and often those words are exceedingly vulgar. Yet clueless speakers casually toss them out all the time, and now and then they land in hot water.” Even as he noted the lost popular awareness of Yiddish as a language of high culture, Haberman himself could not resist the appeal of its “joke potential,” dubbing this problem, “with apologies to the late lexicographer Leo Rosten, the Oys of Yiddish.”<sup>45</sup>

Paradoxically, at the same time that Yiddish was becoming, for many Jews, a lost language, it also gained new value as a signifier of loss. This association was forged during World War II, when Yiddish was quite literally “written . . . with blood,” as Hirsh Glik, a poet of the Vilna Ghetto, famously stated in his “Partisans’ Hymn.” Not merely a metaphor, this image can be seen in one of the most chilling photographs taken during the Holocaust: as one of photographer Hirsh Kadushin’s neighbors lay dying in the Kovno Ghetto, he wrote on the floor in his own blood the words *Yidn nekome!* (Jews—revenge!).<sup>46</sup>

After the war, the sudden absence of Yiddish speech became, especially for Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, a compelling metonym for the tragic loss of its speakers. This development invited some to make special efforts to restore the use of Yiddish as a gesture of rebuilding or of memorialization. Thus, Samy Feder, who in 1945 established a Yiddish theater troupe among Jewish survivors in the liberated concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, recalled, “I was deeply moved when several Jewish girls came to see me and begged me with tears in their eyes to let them join the troupe. They could speak no Yiddish at all, but they were stagestruck. When I told them that we were going to produce our plays in Yiddish, they promised to learn Yiddish in a very short time. . . . How could I send them back?”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in a 1961 collection of Yiddish poetry in English translation the anthropologist, Joseph Leftwich, cited as evidence of the postwar renewal of Yiddish belles lettres the words of an unnamed survivor of Nazi persecution: “Yiddish, which I hardly knew before, the language of my parents and grandparents, has become my most sacred

credo, . . . and I swear that if there is anything I can write out of my experiences, it will be written in Yiddish, the language hallowed by our millions of martyrs.”<sup>48</sup>

Such devotion to Yiddish as an act of remembrance and of a defiant Jewish persistence in the face of genocide elides the fundamental questioning of the language’s future, which was pervasive, if often tacit, in early postwar Yiddish culture. This issue was addressed by some of its finest authors, such as Glatshsteyn, who interrogated the viability of Yiddish poetics in the very act of writing powerful new verse.<sup>49</sup> Abraham Sutzkever, who settled in Palestine in 1947 and would eventually emerge as the doyen of Yiddish poetry in Israel, challenged the new state’s dismissal of Yiddish. In a poem written in 1948, he asked that if someone knows “exactly in what region” the fruits of Yiddish culture

Are straying to their sunset—

Could he please show me

*W/here* the language will go down?

Maybe at the Wailing Wall?

If so, I shall come there, come,

Open my mouth,

And like a lion

Garbed in fiery scarlet,

I shall swallow the language as it sets.

And wake all the generations with my roar!<sup>50</sup>

## YIDDISH AS A POSTVERNACULAR

In the postwar era, those who have maintained a commitment to Yiddish as a *kulturshprakh*, such as Glatshsteyn and Sutzkever, have done so not only in the face of political or ideological opposition, as was the case in prewar years. They have been obliged as well to assert their devotion in the face of the increasingly pervasive notion that Yiddish is moribund—a language whose speech community is dwindling, whose function as the basis of a Jewish national ideology or simply as a Jewish vernacular is passé. Increasingly, devotees of Yiddish have not been able to take for granted their rationales for maintaining the language and must assert explicitly their motives for what was once thought to be self-evident. Thus, the certificate of incorporation of the Forward Association, which has published its Yiddish newspaper for over a century, made no mention of the organization’s commitment to Yiddish when the document was originally drafted in 1901, nor did it include any

mention of Yiddish when it was amended in 1911 or again in 1949. In 1967, however, an amendment to the Forward Association's by-laws stated that its "particular objects and purposes" include "the promotion and development of the use, understanding, and appreciation of the Yiddish language."<sup>51</sup> This change exemplifies the shift of Yiddish from an implicit vernacular to a reification of heritage, wherein the language is perceived as both threatened and valued. (Historian David Lowenthal writes, "Endangered dialects are not yet priced alongside Old Master paintings in Sotheby's salesbooks, but their collectors and protectors talk the same legacy lingo.")<sup>52</sup>

In recent years the viability of Yiddish, especially among generations born after World War II, has become newsworthy in itself. In the United States the devotion of a young Yiddishist to the language has been a recurring subject of features in English-language periodicals.<sup>53</sup> Even Yiddish publications treat the intergenerational maintenance of the language as a phenomenon of note. In 2003 the *Forverts* (the Forward Association's Yiddish-language weekly) reported on the debut of two student journals in Yiddish—*Dos naye dor* (The New Generation), issued in Mexico City, and *Di yunge gvardye* (The Young Guard), published on the Internet in Melbourne, Australia—under the headline "Two New Yiddish Journals by and for Young People!" and ended its report with the wish that "these new youth publications have many young readers!"<sup>54</sup>

Though perceived largely in terms of loss, the current state of Yiddish—increasingly self-conscious, contingent, and tenacious—has also opened up new cultural possibilities for the language. Indeed, the symbolic values invested in Yiddish have expanded greatly and have done so precisely because of the prevailing sense that it is no longer what it once was, with this disparity inspiring innovation. Thus, Yiddish is no longer employed in films as it was in the several dozen features made in Eastern Europe and the United States during the 1930s, in which "everyone—cantors, seamstresses, psychiatrists, police officers, judges, Negro servants, Polish aristocrats, Ukrainian peasants, even anti-Semites—not only speaks Yiddish but inhabits an imaginary world in which Yiddish is the predominant, sometimes the sole language and where Yiddish speakers' sensibilities are central."<sup>55</sup> However, Yiddish continues to be heard occasionally (almost always as one of two or more languages spoken) in films made after World War II, and use of the language is imbued with a range of symbolic values: it is affectionately recalled as a once-scorned Old World vernacular (e.g., in Joan Micklin Silver's 1975 film *Hester Street*); invoked archly as the native tongue of an exoticized American Jewish middle class (by Ken Jacobs in his 1975 film *Urban Peasants: An Essay in Yiddish Structuralism*); deployed with

heavy irony as the lingua franca of the Holocaust (in Andres Veiel's 1994 film *Balagan* [Chaos]); or celebrated as the language of improbable Jewish romance (most provocatively in Jean-Jacques Zilbermann's 1998 film *L'homme est une femme comme les autres* [released in English as *Man Is a Woman*]), in which the sheltered daughter of hasidim and a secular gay Jewish man bond, albeit briefly, through their common love of Yiddish culture). In perhaps the most telling illustration of the self-consciousness with which Yiddish is uttered in post-Holocaust films, Emmanuel Finkel turned his search for elderly Yiddish speakers to perform in his features *Madame Jacques sur La Croisette* (1995) and *Voyages* (1999) into a documentary about the audition process (*Casting*, 2001).

Innovations in the meta-meaning of Yiddish take place today in traditionally observant Jewish venues as well. For example, in 2003 recordings of Rabbi Mordechai Pinchas Teitz's *Daf Hashavua* (Page of the Week), a weekly half-hour radio program devoted to Talmud study originally aired on WEVD (in New York City) from 1953 to 1988, were made available for sale. Tapes of the rabbi's lectures were advertised as offering the experience of a *gemore shier* (Talmud study session) conducted "in a pure Yiddish," providing an opportunity for students to be transported "across centuries of learning." When these lessons originally aired, Yiddish served as the traditional vehicle for the study of sacred texts written in Hebrew and Aramaic. (While this practice continues in some yeshivas, most Talmud scholars conduct their studies in English, modern Hebrew, or another vernacular.) Now the Yiddish of *Daf Hashavua* is offered as having scholarly value in itself, since it embodies the heritage of East European rabbinical erudition and is imbued with a level of sanctity of its own. Whereas Hebrew, the promotion explains, "is *lashon ha-kodesh* [the language of holiness], Yiddish is *l'shon ha-k' doshim* [the language of those who are holy]." Indeed, the recordings of *Daf Hashavua* are promoted not only to "those who want to hear a brilliant, classical *livrishe shiur* that will re-create the study in Lithuanian yeshivos" but also to "those who want to learn a pure, elegant Yiddish."<sup>56</sup>

Conversely, there are those who turn to Yiddish as a symbol that looks not to the past but to the future, not inward to Jewish tradition but outward, beyond its cultural boundaries. Thus, in a commentary on National Public Radio in 2002, writer David Mickel analogized Yiddish and the language of hip-hop, characterizing them as codes that are similarly arcane and playful:

It occurred to me that hip-hop has become this generation's Yiddish. . . . With the right inflection, rap expressions like "shizzle my nizzle," "big ups" and "off

the hizzy” almost sound Yiddish. They’re as fun and clever as they are confusing, but that’s the point. You aren’t supposed to understand them, or at least your parents aren’t. Like the Yiddish of my youth, rap today has become the private language for kids, but fear not. For just as oy vay and schlep have become commonplace, so, too, will “hoop-de” and “holla back.” Then you, too, can get busy with the meshuggeh bling bling that’s playing the dozens to your favorite bubble. Understand, right?<sup>57</sup>

As much as these and other contemporary cultural endeavors differ in the symbolic values that they invest in Yiddish, they share the same mode of engagement with the language—namely, as a postvernacular. As it implies, the term *postvernacular* relates to Yiddish in a manner that both is other than its use as a language of daily life and is responsive to the language having once been a widely used Jewish vernacular. Postvernacularity is, therefore, a relational phenomenon. It always entails some awareness of its distance from vernacularity, which is usually contemplated in terms of retrospection—even as vernacular Yiddish continues to be maintained by Jewish communities around the world. What most distinguishes postvernacular Yiddish is its semiotic hierarchy; unlike vernacular language use, in the postvernacular mode the language’s secondary, symbolic level of meaning is always privileged over its primary level. In other words, in postvernacular Yiddish the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered—if not more so.

Postvernacular Yiddish relates to vernacular Yiddish much as other “post-X” phenomena do to their respective “X’s”: postmodernism, poststructuralism, postfeminism, post-Zionism, or what historian David Hollinger terms postethnicity. “Post-X’s” do not simply supercede “X’s”; as Hollinger notes, they “build upon, rather than reject” their respective “X’s.”<sup>58</sup> A “post-X” is a response or reaction to “X” and exists in a dialogic, interdependent relationship with “X.” In positing postvernacularity as a model for understanding Yiddish in the post-Holocaust era, I claim neither that vernacular Yiddish is a thing of the past nor that we should look forward to such a day when that would be the case. Rather, I argue that postvernacular Yiddish is a phenomenon whose origins can be seen taking shape during the efflorescence of modern Yiddish culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Postvernacularity has since moved to the foreground of Yiddish culture, largely as a consequence of the destruction and attrition of the majority of the world’s native Yiddish speakers in the middle decades of that century. Moreover, as is the case with other “post-X” phenomena, I argue not only that postvernacular Yiddish is de-

pendent on vernacular Yiddish, past and present, but also that contemporary vernacular Yiddish culture is itself shaped in response to postvernacular phenomena.

The notion of postvernacular Yiddish may well seem unsettling, especially to those committed to maintaining Yiddish as a language of daily life. I do not propose postvernacularity as a critique of this commitment but rather as a model for thinking about modes of engaging with Yiddish that have figured throughout the history of its modern culture, before as well as after World War II, across the Jewish ideological spectrum—and have even played a formative role in Yiddishism. In this respect, postvernacularity is a phenomenon not only of Yiddish but of other languages as well—such as Ainu, Irish, and Navajo—whose “native” communities have grappled with language maintenance in the face of challenges posed by various social, political, and cultural forces.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, postvernacular Yiddish should be considered in light of the extent to which nonvernacular languages have been a vital part of the Jewish past since the Babylonian exile, which transformed the ancient Israelites’ Hebrew from a language of daily life into a language of scripture and worship. Subsequently, Judeo-Aramaic has functioned as a postvernacular language for hundreds of years, studied by students of the Talmud and employed in the writing of Jewish marriage contracts and bills of divorce, among other uses; rabbinic Hebrew, traditionally used for Jewish legal responsa and commentaries on sacred texts, has always been a nonvernacular language; modern Hebrew began as a protovernacular during the Haskalah and only became a language of daily life in the twentieth century. Other diaspora Jewish languages are also engaged in the postvernacular mode, such as Albert Memmi’s reflections (originally written in French) on his mother tongue, “the Judeo-Arabic dialect of Tunis, a crippled language . . . hardly understood by the Moslems and completely ignored by everyone else,” or the vestigial role of Piedmontese Judeo-Italian locutions among Primo Levi’s ancestors, recounted in the first chapter of his memoir *Il sistema periodico* (The Periodic Table).<sup>60</sup>

Postvernacular engagements with language inevitably engender different kinds of cultural practices from those of the native speaker or even the schooled vernacular speaker. In this regard, postvernacularity can be a liberating concept, prompting possibilities of language use other than the vernacular model of full fluency in an indigenous mother tongue. Thus, postvernacularity has important implications for the interrelation of language, culture, and identity—indeed, for the notion of what might constitute a “speech community”—especially for a language such as Yiddish, which has been so extensively and exclusively associated with Ashkenazic folkhood.





Yiddish actor and radio announcer Zvee Scooler in the studio of radio station WEVD, New York City, in the mid-1960s, holding a copy of *Instant Yiddish*. This sound recording, scripted by Fred Kogos, features Scooler and actress Maria Karnilova in a series of lessons in conversational Yiddish. The album jacket explains that "you don't have to be Jewish to speak Yiddish."

Courtesy of the Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

To understand postvernacularity it is therefore essential not to regard it as any less valid than vernacular engagement with language. In particular, postvernacular Yiddish is distinguished from its vernacular use, as well as from the use of other languages of daily life employed by Jews today, by virtue of its being motivated so prominently by desire. Increasingly, speaking, reading, writing—even hearing—Yiddish has become an elective act. Relatively few Jews now use Yiddish because it is the only language that they have for communication with other Jews, nor is Yiddish thrust on its speakers by any polity. Rather, those who use Yiddish (including a noteworthy number of non-Jews) do so voluntarily, as communities, as families, and as individuals. Understanding postvernacular Yiddish, then, requires investigation into the desires of those who choose to pursue it. What is it that draws people to sign up for Yiddish language classes, to attend Yiddish festivals, to organize Yiddish conversation groups, to support the rescue of abandoned Yiddish books, to

purchase mock Yiddish dictionaries, to compose pious songs and plays in Yiddish, to subscribe to Yiddish periodicals, to translate works of world literature into Yiddish, or to tune into Yiddish radio programs via the Internet? The great variety of activities and agents involved in postvernacular Yiddish culture suggest a complex of motives; taken together, what do they reveal about Jewish culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, especially at a time when those who remember prewar Yiddish culture make up an aging, declining population?

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These are daunting questions to tackle, and not merely because Yiddish culture has become so diverse, at times even contradictory, in its range of practices. The greatest challenge, I believe, is to assess recent Yiddish culture without judging it from pre-Holocaust perspectives. This challenge calls for a special effort to discuss what contemporary Yiddish culture *is*, rather than what it *isn't*. That being said, it would be naïve to sever all consideration of post-Holocaust Yiddish culture from its prewar past, especially because the contemporary culture is shaped to such a great extent by efforts to engage with Jewish life "before" (not only before World War II, but also before the Bolshevik Revolution, World War I, the era of mass immigration to America, the Haskalah, the advent of hasidism, the Cossack massacres in Ukraine, the arrival of Jews in Poland, the Crusades). Taking into account the extensive retrospection of contemporary Yiddish culture calls for careful consideration of the "past" and "present" as constructs. The boundaries separating them, which seem etched indelibly into the history of Yiddish—especially by the Holocaust—need to be scrutinized to determine whether they are as definitive as they seem. In fact, some issues that one might expect to have arisen only after the Holocaust—such as concerns about the decreased use of Yiddish and the loss of it as an idiomatic and indigenous vernacular—turn out to have been expressed with as profound a sense of urgency well before World War II. But what does it mean to voice such anxieties at, say, the turn of the twentieth century as opposed to at the turn of the twenty-first?

Not only do these issues need to be situated in historical context; their intentions require analysis as well. Worries about the decline of a language are inevitably tied to extralinguistic concerns. For generations, much of the discussion of Yiddish has been in part a symbolic endeavor, in which the language stands in for Jewish culture or politics more generally or for Jewish people themselves. For example, the enduring fascination with non-Jews who know Yiddish, while Jews' command of the language is in decline (recently exemplified by the attention to U.S. Secretary of

State Colin Powell's knowledge of the language or singer Madonna performing Yiddish songs), betokens larger questions about Jewish literacy and identity.<sup>61</sup> An analysis of the state of Yiddish in recent times is also, therefore, an examination of what now constitutes Jewish culture as a set of definitional practices.

Moreover, this analysis makes for a revealing case study of how people conceptualize the interrelation of language, culture, and identity when the widely held notion that these are somehow mutually constitutive has been disrupted. For the people in question, this situation raises provocative questions: When a language no longer seems inevitable, rooted, indigenous, but appears instead to be fading, moribund, or even dead, what are the implications for its attendant culture? Conversely, when they perceive their culture as being in crisis, neglected, or vanquished, what do they see as the consequences for the culture's relationship to language? Studying this phenomenon calls for interrogating these questions and addressing others as well: How are the people in question affected by these pronouncements of loss, by the undoing of the definitional ties that bind them to a certain language and culture? As a result of this disruption, how do these people reconceptualize language and culture, so that they might still be meaningful in relation to one another and meaningful to this people's collective sense of self?

These questions speak to a growing challenge for humankind generally, as we confront language loss on a global scale with unknown consequences for the richness and variety of human culture.<sup>62</sup> With regard to Yiddish, this investigation has a specific urgency now, with the approach of yet another threshold in the language's turbulent annals—the eventual passing of the last native speakers of Yiddish who acquired and used the language in prewar Eastern Europe. Well before World War II, Eastern Europe was widely regarded as the Yiddish “heartland,” even as millions of its inhabitants fled geographically, ideologically, and linguistically. The value then invested in Yiddish Eastern Europe as an indigenous fountainhead of Jewish linguistic and cultural authenticity was evinced by writers' and researchers' repeated efforts to document this way of life, which was perceived, since the mid-nineteenth century, as being ever on the verge of disappearing.<sup>63</sup> Even so, the extensive devastation of people, places, and institutions wrought so swiftly and cruelly during the Holocaust is of such a magnitude that all previous notions of loss in this culture—including the extensive upheavals of World War I—pale in comparison. If the finality of the Holocaust for “authentic” Yiddish seems to many to be self-evident, how have those committed to Yiddish answered this most daunting challenge in its long history, and how might they continue to do so in the future?

Ascertaining the nature of something as protean as postvernacular Yiddish calls

for an equally adventurous, expansive approach, looking across cultural genres, languages, ideologies, and national boundaries, as well as drawing on resources from various scholarly disciplines. *Adventures in Yiddishland* examines an array of cultural undertakings in Europe, the (former) Soviet Union, the Americas, Palestine/Israel, and elsewhere throughout the twentieth century and into the present, as practiced in Jewish communities ranging from ardent secularists to *khareydim* and among non-Jews as well. The analysis is informed by the work of historians, literary scholars, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and an array of cultural theoreticians.

However, this book does not strive to offer a comprehensive inventory or chronicle of Yiddish activities of the past six decades. Rather, the approach is selective, focusing on particular phenomena that best demonstrate the use and significance of Yiddish as a postvernacular language (as opposed to, say, centering the study on those examples of Yiddish culture considered to be the most popular or accomplished). Moreover, this book's selective approach reflects a special interest in tracking the dynamics of postvernacular Yiddish. In particular, this focus entails a shift away from Eastern Europe and toward other centers of Yiddish culture, especially in America, as the geography of Yiddish was reconfigured over the course of the past half-century. My focus on Yiddish in America reflects a larger reconfiguring of the global Jewish diaspora following World War II, which placed the United States at its center—even as it was juxtaposed against a new center of Jewish life in Israel.<sup>64</sup> Related to this geographical development is an equally important shift in the international vernacular shared by the majority of the world's Jews from Yiddish to English over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>65</sup>

*Adventures in Yiddishland* organizes the analysis of postvernacular Yiddish according to key activities that span the full spectrum of modern Yiddish culture. Each chapter focuses on a particular activity, broadly defined—such as Yiddish pedagogy (chapter 2) or practices of materializing the language (chapter 5)—and examines how it has been engaged across temporal, geographical, generic, and ideological boundaries. While linked to the others as part of a multifaceted approach to the larger topic at hand, each chapter constitutes a self-sufficient study with its own parameters, gauged to its particular subject. Thus, the examination of translation (chapter 3) traces the dynamics of translating literary works into and from Yiddish from the sixteenth century to the present, in order to consider how changes in writing, reading, and publishing practices are implicated in the shifting meanings assigned to Yiddish as a literary language. In contrast, the analysis of performing Yiddish (chapter 4) concentrates on very recent phenomena, since these evince an



unprecedented degree of self-consciousness with regard to the challenges of employing this language in performance.

Chapter 1 of *Adventures in Yiddishland* considers the vital role that the imagination plays in facilitating postvernacular Yiddish culture by focusing on how the idea of Yiddishland has been articulated, both explicitly and implicitly, in twentieth-century Jewish culture. The conjuring of Yiddishland proves to be a wide-ranging enterprise, manifest in political and literary writing, as well as in an array of cultural phenomena, including maps, children's games, public displays, and websites. These practices, and their implications of associating notions of territoriality and sovereignty with language use, change fundamentally after World War II; taken together, though, these various Yiddishlands reveal both the power and the limitations of the imagination to create a virtually indigenous place for Yiddish.

The second chapter traces the dynamics of Yiddish-language pedagogy. Long regarded as something Ashkenazim acquired "natively," Yiddish became a subject taught in classrooms to young Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, a development that epitomizes its speakers' engagement in the "modern Jewish revolution." The advent of Yiddish pedagogy thus marks both a new valuation of the language as a *folkshprakh* and, at the same time, the destabilization of this notion, epitomized by the advent of Yiddish studies in universities in Europe, Israel, and North America after World War II. Yiddish pedagogy also provides a strategic opportunity for tracking shifting notions of the symbolic value of the language as it passes from one generation to the next, configured variously as an emblem of emergent Jewish nationalism, an exercise of homage to ethnic heritage, or, among *kharydim*, a bulwark securing religious tradition.

Chapter 3 considers the role that literary translations from and into Yiddish have played in the conceptualization of Yiddish culture, beginning with the earliest works of Yiddish literature in print and concluding with certain recent translations of works of world literature into Yiddish, which exemplify postvernacularity's distinctive privileging of a language's symbolic level of meaning. Translations also provide the opportunity to consider the significance of Yiddish in relation to other languages. The presentation and reception of all the texts in question demonstrate cultural negotiations at linguistic frontiers, in which the act of translation takes on the contradictory symbolic values of continuity and homage, versus rupture and betrayal. These issues assume added importance in the post-World War II era, given postvernacular Yiddish culture's inherent reliance on other languages as means of communication at the primary level.

In the fourth chapter the role that a wide variety of public performances—including festivals, concerts, workshops, and retreats—play in contemporary Yiddish culture is scrutinized. These events transform the vernacular use of Yiddish through practices in which the language, rather than serving as a means of performance, has become the performance's end. Often this transformation entails the professionalization of speaking Yiddish as a performance skill; at other times, it involves complementing or even replacing spoken Yiddish with other forms of communication, including nonverbal ones, such as instrumental music or dance. The study of these recent events reveals how, in the postvernacular mode, the uttering of Yiddish is an increasingly self-conscious practice, since saying something in Yiddish has become a noteworthy activity above and beyond what is being said.

Chapter 5 analyzes the wide-ranging material culture of Yiddish produced in post-World War II America, focusing on comic, lowbrow items (T-shirts, coffee mugs, novelty items, etc.). These realia provide an opportunity to consider how, as the language is atomized into a limited number of isolated words, vernacular Yiddish has been both fetishized and mocked. This practice, also manifest in a sizeable inventory of comic Yiddish dictionaries, expands the meaning of individual words and idioms while telescoping the meaningfulness of Yiddish as a full language, transforming it into a signifier of the carnivalesque in contemporary Jewish life. In addition to the insights these objects offer into the meaning of Yiddish in American Jewish popular culture during the past six decades, they demonstrate how new, growing forms of Jewish culture—here, the creation, promotion, purchasing, and collecting of objects—interface with cultural practices that have atrophied—in this instance, Yiddish fluency.

The final chapter interrogates the theorizing of Yiddish, beginning with its pervasive characterization as a moribund language—a trope that began to be sounded just as Yiddish culture flourished with unprecedented innovation and energy at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to analyzing the implications of this problematic trope's long-standing appeal, this chapter considers a variety of recent alternative models for discussing the state of Yiddish. These appear in analytic and conjectural writings and also emerge from various cultural practices, including those of two disparate contemporary American Jewish subcultures examined here: ultra-Orthodox *yeshivas* and queer Jews. The chapter concludes with a summary of the contributions that postvernacularity offers as a model for characterizing the nature of contemporary Yiddish and thinking about the possibilities of its future.

In sum, *Adventures in Yiddishland* strives to assess changes that Yiddish has undergone since the end of World War II and to offer perspectives on the nature of the language now, at another threshold moment in its remarkable history. I hope that this book will provide insights to scholars studying this as well as other languages and to all those pursuing their own adventures in the realm of Yiddish.

## CHAPTER ONE

### IMAGINING YIDDISHLAND

The postvernacular mode prompts us to rethink the possibilities of language. The implications of this exercise are of particular importance to Yiddish, since ideas about what roles it might play in Jewish culture shifted radically during the past century. Once widely regarded as a central force, in mid-century Yiddish was abruptly displaced. Other linguistic prospects—especially the establishment of the State of Israel, with Hebrew as its official language, and the greater importance of English as a language for Jewish culture internationally—just as swiftly came to the fore. In the post-World War II era, testing this new configuration of what does—and does not—seem possible for Jewish language has at times proved remarkably daunting, challenging even the powers of the imagination.

Thus, one of the more surprisingly provocative phenomena of Yiddish culture since World War II is a small paperback entitled *Say It in Yiddish*, a phrase book for travelers. This volume, part of a Dover Publications series (which includes over two dozen languages, among them modern Hebrew, Indonesian, and Swahili), first appeared in 1958 and is still in print. The book was edited by linguist Uriel Weinreich, then Atran Chair of Yiddish Studies at Columbia University, and his wife, folklorist Beatrice Weinreich.

Almost forty years after its publication, *Say It in Yiddish* became the subject of some controversy, when author Michael Chabon discussed it in an essay that appeared in 1997, first in *Civilization*, a periodical published in association with the Li-