

A VIBRANT YIDDISH CULTURE

By Paul Pascal

Canadian ethnographer/anthropologist Wade Davis tells us that 6,000 - 7,000 distinct living languages were documented in the twentieth century. Of those, fully half have become extinct in our lifetime or will soon be extinct. Some observers have put the rate of extinction at one language every two weeks. More recently, other ethnographers have recalibrated that rate to be “only” one language every three months. In his TED lectures, Davis takes on those who are “fine with” the death rate of languages, i.e., those who assert that a world where everyone will speak the same language will be a more unified, cohesive world. “Okay,” retorts Davis (in English, obviously, and to an English-speaking audience), “and are you 'fine with' that if the one universal language were Yoruba [a language of central Africa], or Cantonese?” What would it mean to you if it is you, asks Davis, who lose that key to your entire culture and way of life? “A language is more than vocabulary and grammar,” he reminds us. “It is the essence of a civilization, the indispensable portal to its wealth of wisdom, history, and creativity; a unique expression of the human imagination and heart; an old-growth forest of the mind.”

Davis' wake-up call should have particular resonance for us as Jews. The prevailing notion today is that the Jewish people has a single distinctly Jewish language, namely Hebrew. A century or so ago this position was neither obvious nor the consensus. On the contrary, it was hotly contested in Jewish circles, and the linguistic centrality of Hebrew was the result of conscious decision-making that shut out Yiddish and other Jewish languages as less legitimate, with Hebrew as victor, emerging out of fractious and acrimonious debate and clash within the Jewish world. Its acceptance and status were far from an organic evolution.

It will likely be no news to readers of this article that as a living, spoken language, Hebrew, at the turn of the last century, was dead. Not to put too fine a point on it, Hebrew was already essentially dead even in the ancient Land of Israel for six centuries before the Jewish expulsion by the Romans in 70 C.E. During those six centuries, starting from the first Jewish expulsion, perpetrated by the Babylonians, our ancestors spoke the language of their oppressor, Aramaic, which was eventually elevated to its position as a second Jewish holy tongue.

Some readers may be surprised to learn that even in our own day there are at minimum 27 distinctly Jewish languages worldwide. Most of them are, as we can infer from Davis' advisory, struggling for survival (in part, at least, due to the “Jewish language wars” referred to above).

Because the majority of them bear names that hyphenate “Judeo-“ with a language spoken by an ethnic population among whom Jews lived and mingled, it is tempting to view such Jewish tongues as mere dialects or tweaks of their surrounding languages, but in fact most of them can be considered languages in their own right. They are distinct from their counterparts in their phonology (pattern of speech sounds); in the way in which new words are formed; in their grammar and syntax; in their admixture of words with specifically Jewish significance and of words that reflect the migrations of its Jewish speakers; and so on.

Most of these languages use the Hebrew alphabet or a variant of it. Examples include Judeo-Tat (spoken by Caucasus Mountain Jews), Judeo-Marathi (spoken by Bene-Israel of India), Yahudi (Iraqi Judeo-Arabic), not to mention the more widely known Ladino (also known as Judezmo or Judeo-Spanish) and Yiddish.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Yiddish was the first language of 80% of world Jewry. (To be clear, that is 80% of all Jews worldwide, not 80% of only Ashkenazi Jews.) Even so, it was often derided as a bastardization of German—not a real language. Journalists and authors writing in Yiddish sometimes tried to add what they thought was “legitimacy” to Yiddish by an infusion of modern German vocabulary, their efforts referred to as “Daytshmerish”. Furthermore, when Yiddish terms needed to be transcribed into English, this was done using German spelling rules, such as in words like “shtick” (rather than “shtick”), “Bei Mir Bistu Shoen” (instead of “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn”), “mensch” (for mentsh), and so on. (This practice, happily, was reduced—to a degree—later in the century, once transcription of Yiddish into the English alphabet was given its own uniquely Jewish standardization by the philologists and historians working with an institute known as YIVO, first in Vilna and later transferring to New York. The story of YIVO is worthy of a Narayever article of its own, to say the least.)

Yiddish is no more a bastardization of German than French is a bastardization of Latin. Indeed, a unilingual German speaker today would be at sea attempting a fluid conversation in Yiddish, given its vast component of Hebrew and Slavic vocabulary, given the many words in Yiddish which, while Germanic in origin, went into disuse by Germans 800-900 years ago (much as Chaucer's English did for Anglophones), given its sentence structure so unlike German's, as well as its nuanced cultural and religious references, its range of regional pronunciations, and so on. (Reading Yiddish, with its Hebrew-derived alphabet, would, of course, be impossible for a German coming to it without specifically Jewish learning.) Here is a sample sentence to show how Yiddish can differ from standard German. (For the purposes of this illustration, the Yiddish will be transcribed into the Roman alphabet, using YIVO rules for doing so.)

English: There is a dream in the Book of Genesis that I would like you to decipher.

German: Es gibt im Buch Genesis einem Traum denn ich möchte Sie dass zu entziffern.

Yiddish: Es iz faran a kholem in seyfer breyshis vos ikh volt gevolt ir zolt oystaytshn.

Now, granted that in this example I've stacked the deck a bit by including a religious reference, for starters, but despite the possible error or two in my German, the general principle still holds: Yiddish is not garbled German. It is its own language. So too is it the case with many of the other 26 Jewish world languages (albeit to different degrees). However, in line with Wade Davis' warning, there is fear that virtually all Jewish languages except Hebrew are on their last legs, along with whole worlds of history, philosophy, literature, and much more.

Despite that achingly sad prospect, there are those who do not fully agree with its pessimistic view, certainly not in the case of Yiddish. The details of their position will have to wait for another article, but until then, here are some hints, beginning with a truncated list of recent books:

Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish, by Dovid Katz, 2004. Katz, who founded the Yiddish program at Oxford, points out (among other contra-indications) that Yiddish is the lived language of an estimated half million Haredim worldwide, and their birthrate doubles their population every fifteen years.

Comprehensive English-Yiddish Dictionary, ed. Gitl Schaechter-Visvanath and Paul Glasser, a tome of 50,000 entries and 33,000 sub-entries, including Yiddish words for kitty litter, website, and video conference, for example. It was published this past year—2016!

Yiddishkeit [unfortunately, the title uses the German orthography, but makes up for it inside], ed. Harvey Pekar and Paul Buhle, published 2011. Harvey Pekar, ז"ל, the main energy behind this graphic-novel-style collection of monographs depicting and critiquing luminaries of Yiddish literature and lesser known authors in that language, was also the creator of the autobiographical comic series, *American Splendor* (yes, the same American Splendor that was made into a blockbuster movie a few years ago).

And there are other hints, as well, that Yiddish, at least, has a shot. This list is far from comprehensive:

The biennial Ashkenaz Festival here in Toronto, an extravaganza of Yiddish culture and music over Labour Day weekend (now expanded to include periodic events during the year and with support of other Jewish languages and culture around the world as well). Music is the pre-eminent medium here, but Yiddish is given its due.

Klez Kanada, a yearly week of klezmer music and Yiddish lyrics, in the Laurentians north of Montreal. Yiddish classes on more than one level are a staple. Festivals that parallel the above two examples are annual events in Weimar, Germany, and Krakow, Poland.

Yugntruf, or “Youth for Yiddish”, is an organization of young Yiddish-speaking adults that is dedicated to spreading the Yiddish language through various programs and events. (Wikipedia). For the last 35 years, Yugntruf has sponsored Yiddish Vokh, a weeklong immersion retreat for families, where only Yiddish is spoken (often for the first time), and where high quality programming provides knowledge, fun and enthusiasm for the language.

Yiddish Farm is an organic farm in Goshen, NY, whose members speak Yiddish exclusively, and who are working toward building a permanent Yiddish-speaking community there (despite most not having been born into Yiddish speaking families). They offer immersive Yiddish programs for each other and for visitors, and seek to empower Jews to reclaim Yiddish as a source of Jewish culture, identity and learning.

Folksbiene—The National Yiddish Theatre, which has operated in New York continuously since 1915, and whose productions are performed entirely in Yiddish (with supertitles in English, and sometimes Russian, for the Yiddishimpaired).

Venturing beyond the nostalgia of “Fiddler on the Roof” (which was based on Sholem Aleichem's “Tevye der Milkhiker” but toned down and sweetened for western audiences), Off-Broadway currently mounted “Indecent”, in Yiddish, a play about a play--namely Sholem Asch's “God of Vengeance”. The

plot of Asch's Yiddish play revolves around a lesbian love affair, and was shut down by police, its cast arrested and indicted, when it was first brought to the New York stage in 1923. The success of the current play, which examines the events around that 1923 production, has earned it a run on Broadway itself, opening in a few months. The cast includes Shane Baker, a vaudevillian who grew up Episcopalian in Kansas City, and whose Yiddish is completely fluent—indeed, beautiful. (In another part of his life Baker has created a series of podcasts in which he teaches Yiddish idioms through short but hilarious scenarios.)

Other Broadway and Off-Broadway productions in Yiddish have included “Death of A Salesman”, which came to Toronto not long ago on a continent-wide tour, and “Waiting for Godot”, among others.

Many, many **North American universities have added Yiddish language and/or literature to their offerings**, something that was virtually absent a generation ago. It is a relief to see this happening at last in Israeli universities, as well, along with other vibrant events and institutions outside of university life, in and/or for the Yiddish language.

That the examples provided above—the book list, the events, and the institutions—are all twenty-first century phenomena, tells us something.

We Jews are a stubborn lot. This stubbornness resurrected one dead Jewish language a hundred years ago. We can see in the examples I've cited our tenacity to fight for, and preserve, Yiddish and our other array of Jewish languages. To brazenly borrow from David Ben Gurion who, from the early years of Zionism on, had been an arch enemy of Yiddish, for the sake of Hebrew, (but whose first book was written in Yiddish!): For us Jews, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.