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New Last Words of Yiddish

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Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 102, Number 1, Winter 2012, pp. v-vii
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2012.0004

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The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Winter 2012) v–vii

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

New Last Words of Yiddish

On the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, Isaac Bashevis Singer delivered a rich encomium to the Yiddish language, casting it as a way of life more than as a mere linguistic vessel. Yiddish, he noted, was a language of exile that lacked a vocabulary for matters martial—"weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics." And yet, Singer was far more taken by what the language *could* convey than by what it could not: "One can find in the Yiddish tongue and in the Yiddish spirit expressions of pious joy, lust for life, longing for the Messiah, patience and deep appreciation of human individuality."

Indeed, Yiddish, which Singer famously promised in 1978 "has not yet said its last word," has had a remarkably diverse, eventful, and trying history. From its Western Askhenazic roots to its current Hasidic preserves in Brooklyn and Bnai Brak, it has traversed exceptionally rugged terrain over the course of its thousand-year history. This journey has not only steeled it to the inevitability of disappointment and danger but allowed for a stunning range of voices—from early modern penitential prayers for women to a daring and experimental modernist literature, from earnest ideological manifestoes devoted to the preservation of the language itself to biting, parodic humor that undoes self-serious piety or politics. In its many guises, Yiddish became the language—and glue—of a mythic "Yiddishland," a cultural nation with many capitals though no territory of its own.

Noticeable today are a pair of interrelated attitudes toward Yiddish, both born of the language's grievous, nearly mortal, injury suffered in the Holocaust. First, there is an unmistakable nostalgia, especially among North American Jews in the postwar period, toward the intimacy, warmth, and innocence of Yiddish, the lost language of grandparents, no better symbolized than by *Fiddler on the Roof*. There is also a more recent form of nostalgia toward Yiddish—a kind of Diaspora cultural politics—that seeks to recover an explosive Yiddish vitality forgotten and suppressed by the Hebraist and Israel-centered agenda of much organized Jewish communal life.

The Jewish Quarterly Review (Winter 2012)
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That latter impulse blends into a second identifiable attitude of note: a renewed scholarly commitment to grant the somewhat neglected language and its culture their due. This is hardly to suggest that scholarship on Yiddish is a recent creation. There was a scholarly enterprise devoted to Yiddish and its culture that preceded the establishment of YIVO in 1925 but reached its greatest fulfillment in that Vilna-based institution in the interwar era. And yet, over the past few decades, one senses a new sense of urgency to engage the subject with vigor and purpose, motivated, in no small part, by the trepidation that Yiddish may indeed soon speak its last word. The various disciplinary rubrics that fall under the heading "cultural studies" have demonstrated a particular receptivity to Yiddish, drawn to its status as an expressive, extraterritorial, minority language. And so, we have an ever-expanding scholarship on Yiddish that follows its journey from robust and multifaceted vernacular, spoken by millions, to "postvernacular" culture, anchored by material objects and cherished by the children and grandchildren of its native speakers for whom it is a pleasing, but distant, memory. From a different, even countervailing, angle, we also have research devoted to the study of the cradle-to-grave Yiddish worlds of contemporary traditionalist Orthodox communities.

The interlocking fields of Yiddish studies have undoubtedly breathed new life into the language and its past. In recognition of this new energy, the editors of *JQR* decided to collect in this issue three fine essays that place Yiddish at the forefront. In his opening Note, Ber Boris Kotlerman uses historical-philological tools to identify, contextualize, and translate the two oldest letters written in Old Yiddish. Written in the wake of the blood libel directed against Jews in Trent in 1475, the letters reveal the central role played by Yiddish as the everyday (and epistolary) medium of European Jews in early modern times.

Leaping ahead four and a half centuries, Rachel Seelig explores in her essay the literary experimentation of Yiddish poet Moyshe Kulbak during his Berlin phase. Settled in the midst of the vibrant Jewish ambience of Weimar Berlin, in which many fellow Eastern European Jews were deeply engaged in an array of cultural pursuits, Kulbak felt himself in a state of isolation during his brief time (1920–23) in the German capital. The condition of being in, but not of, Weimar Berlin created a distinctive balance of distance and proximity that allowed Kulbak to read, observe, and absorb from the pulsating literary and artistic currents of the day, including and especially expressionism. Seelig demonstrates via careful textual and contextual analysis how Kulbak transplanted his own expressionist experimentation into a poetic idiom for the Soviet Yiddish setting in which he operated after Berlin. In conclusion, she suggests that we can

benefit not only from gauging "the influence of Weimar culture on Yiddish literature" but also by thinking of Kulbak—and other Yiddish writers—as contributors to the culture of literary modernism that left such a profound imprint on Berlin and other centers of the "world republic of letters" in the 1920s.

In its concluding essay, the issue moves from Seelig's study of Yiddish as literary medium to John Efron's highly original focus on Yiddish as repository of humor. Efron traces the origins and evolution of the great Yiddish comedy duo of Shimen Dzigan and Yisroel Shumacher. He commences his story in the duo's native Lódź, the gritty and textured Polish manufacturing center that also was home to a set of rich Jewish cultural worlds (and a large Jewish minority in the city). He then alights in Israel, where the two carved out a unique position on the cultural landscape by dint of their very existence as popular performers in Yiddish, the language of many of the country's leading politicians who nonetheless sought nothing more than escape from it through the revival of Hebrew. The stain of Yiddish, the language of the submissive Diaspora Jew, was a mark of great indignity for these leaders. Mindful of this, Dzigan, in particular, insisted on Yiddish as a tool of biting satire, indeed, of a loyal, but fierce, opposition to the inscrutable political and bureaucratic culture of his new country.

As much as Efron's essay is about humor, it is also about Yiddish, for the two, he suggests throughout, are inseparable. Yiddish bore within itself registers of emotion and inflection that permitted a uniquely ironic and poignant humor. Even more, it was for Dzigan, as for millions of others, "a thoroughly natural and beloved form of expression and the most articulate means by which to communicate." The three contributors make clear the naturalness and multifariousness of Yiddish at the height of its powers. In the final essay, we are exposed to Yiddish's post-Holocaust existence as well, when it began to recede into a warm and sad memory for the vast majority of Jews in the world—a place from which current scholarship energetically seeks to salvage it.

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