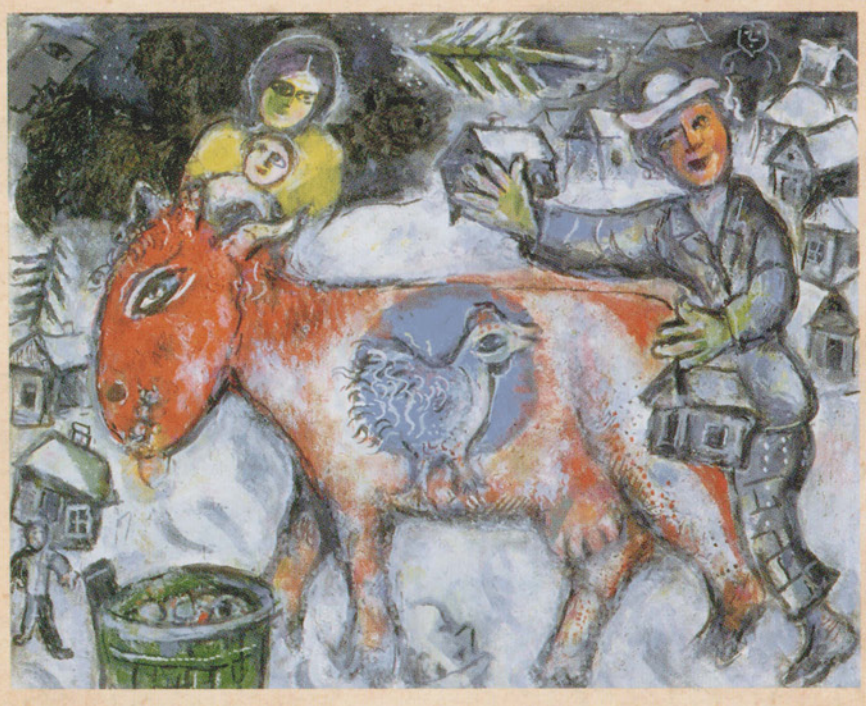
"Dovid Katz's book on Yiddish reflects the beauty, the variety, and the warmth of a language that refuses to be extinguished. Its miraculous survival brings joy to its readers." —Elie Wiesel

Words on Fire

The Unfinished Story of Yiddish



Dovid Katz

Revised and Updated

Praise for *Words on Fire*

"Dovid Katz argues convincingly that Yiddish is the product of history: not a makeshift jargon, but the complex linguistic outgrowth of a thousand years. . . . 'Words on Fire' abounds in surprising information."
—*Newsday*

". . . Nuanced and persuasive." —*Newsday*

"Dovid Katz, with his breadth of knowledge and research of this remarkable language and the culture that sustained it, has written a unique book that is both dynamic and informative."
—*Jerusalem Post*

". . . in this ambitious, comprehensive and entertaining history he [Katz] makes clear not only its [Yiddish's] past but its future."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"In *Words on Fire*, Professor Dovid Katz reaffirms his role as one of the world's leading scholars in the field of Yiddish Studies. Katz's command of Yiddish linguistics, Yiddish literature and Eastern European Jewish cultural history is unsurpassed. *Words on Fire* is a bold and timely book that deserves to be read not only by specialists in the field of Jewish Studies but also by anyone concerned about the future of Yiddish and Jewish culture. While one may not agree with all of Katz's conclusions, resulting from three decades of research, no one can question that this brilliantly written work has been a true labor or love."
—Carl J. Rheins, Ph.D., Executive Director,
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

"I love this book. It's a treasure trove of nostalgia and a beacon of hope. It warmed my heart to read how the rich emotional Yiddish jargon became an elegant language of literature; then it broke my heart to read about the near-total destruction of Yiddish civilization, one of the great cultures of the world. This book revives hope that Yiddish will still flourish, even in a small way." —Alan Dershowitz

Words on Fire

The Unfinished Story of Yiddish

Dovid Katz

A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York

Maps and Graphics by

Giedre Beconyte

Hardcover edition first published in 2004 by Basic Books,
A Member of the Perseus Books Group
Paperback edition first published in 2007 by Basic Books

Design by Jeff Williams

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

Katz, Dovid.
Words on fire : the unfinished story of Yiddish / Dovid Katz.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-465-03728-5
ISBN-10: 0-465-03728-3 (alk. paper)
1. Yiddish language—History. I. Title.

PJ5113.K38 2004
439'.1'09—dc22

2004010296

Paperback: ISBN-13: 978-0-465-03730-8; ISBN-10: 0-465-03730-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

today are descendants of East European Jews who became to some degree or another *véltlakh*.

TO ZION, WITH NATIONALISM, IN HEBREW

The history as usually presented by the perceived victors created (and continues to perpetuate) many misimpressions about the revival of spoken Hebrew. Some twentieth-century books claimed that Hebrew had "always been spoken" while others tried to maximize the "miracle" of its revival by pointing out that it had been dead. In fact, in the nineteenth century, nobody spoke Hebrew or had spoken it for around two thousand years at the very minimum. But among Ashkenazim (and not only Ashkenazim) it was far from dead. It was prayed in every day, studied every day, recited every day, and quoted every day; it was the language of the most sacred text of the civilization, the Torah or Five Books of Moses (the Pentateuch). The Western concept of text does not do historical justice to the intimacy, immediacy, and quality of being alive that the Torah and other classic works of Judaism held (and hold) for traditional Jewish culture. Moreover, many genres of new Hebrew texts were created over many generations without interruption, including letters, community records, contracts, gravestone inscriptions, in addition to the learned commentaries, responsa (legal question-and-answer compendiums), and more.

The examples of "living Hebrew" in Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic civilization are virtually incalculable. In addition to the many texts, there is the intricately interwoven Hebrew and Aramaic component in everyday spoken Yiddish. Take an everyday concept like "big." The common, neutral Yiddish word is *groys* (pronounced *greys* among the Litvaks in the north). It is part of an extensive family of words in Yiddish, ranging from the loving diminutive noun *a gróysinke* (masculine *gróysinker*), referring to "a large lovable bear of a person" (or animal) to *greysn zikh*, a verb for "to brag." There is *gróys-artik*, meaning "magnificent," and *gróys-hartsik*, which is closer to English "magnanimous." There is the diminutive of the adjective, *gréyslakh* (kind of big, biggish), the noun *gróyskayt* (greatness) and its nuanced variant *gróysikayt* (elevatedness). There are fixed combinations like *groyser*

mentsh (influential person), *groyser rov* (brilliant rabbinic scholar), down to the satiric *groyser makher* (big shot) and *groyser knaker* (hot shot). People from big cities are *groys-shtótishe* (in contrast to the small-town folk who are *kleyn-shtétldike*). *Groys-shtótish* came to mean "cosmopolitan" or "urban" or "broad-minded." A *gróyse máyse* is an old skeptic's phrase, literally a "big story" but used to mean "Well, big deal!" There is much more, all with *groys* from the same Old Yiddish word for "big" or "large" that comes from a similar Middle High German word and has developed in all kinds of specifically Yiddish ways over the ages. Where does Hebrew come into it? The ancient Hebrew and Aramaic root GDL and its most common derivative, Ashkenazic Hebrew *godoyl* (Lithuanian *godeyl*), and Yiddish *godl* (Polish and Ukrainian *gudl*), although not the "simple" word for "big" would be well-known to the entire traditional population of an Ashkenazic community (in traditionalist communities—everyone). There is *godl be-tóyre* (great scholar in Torah), *godl be-Yisróel* (great Jewish leader), and *godl-bedór* (gratest of the generation), as well as the less lofty *gádlen* (braggart), *gádles* (case of bluster), *gadlónes* (the more general trait of showing off), adjectives *gádlesdik* (haughty) and *gadlónesdik* (being a haughty, arrogant character). Then there is the lethal *A gdúle!* It refers to something that somebody else thinks is something to brag about but is really nothing much. The Jewish calendar includes *shábes hagódl* (the Great Sabbath prior to Passover), and every traditional Jewish child learns about the ancient *kóyhen gódl* (high priest). The Aramaic for big, *rabo,* is universally known from the name of the seventh day of the holiday *Súkes* (Succoth, Pentecost)—*Hoyshána rábe* (literally, the great Hosanna), and from a line of the Kaddish prayer for the dead that is said by all those who respond to the mourner with *yehéy shméy rabo* (may the great name). It would be rendered *rábo* (Polish–Ukrainian *rábu*) in a more intimate family or "study house" style; *rabó* (Polish–Ukrainian *rabú*) in a more formal "big synagogue" style. Someone in the middle of the traditional educational ladder would know about the *Médresh rábe,* the ancient collection of legends and homiletics that was widely studied, and its individual books (*Bréyshes rábe*—Genesis Rabbah, and so forth). These examples do not come close to exhausting the intricacies of words, thoughts, history, culture,

and nuances inherent in the various *Ashkenazic* words for "big" or "large," be they dervied from Yiddish, Hebrew, or Aramaic. Each is part of a vast interlocking complex that evolved over the generations in a totally Jewish society, though etymologically they come from diverse sources (Canaanite, Aramaic, Germanic).

For the Yiddish speaker to acquire the "Hebrew word for big" was a straightforward conscious adaptation, not a case of reviving the dead. The same is true of a large number of other roots. The shift from a complex system to the adoption of one of its parts as a translative equivalent of an everyday concept is incomparably easier than the other way around.

Hebraism and Zionism were natural Jewish versions of the language- and territory-based nationalisms in Eastern Europe. The ultimate results were roughly analogous, notwithstanding all the differences (Jews had neither spoken Hebrew nor exercised Jewish sovereignty for a long period of time). But the idea of the Land of Israel was not "revived" either. It had been part of the Jewish mainstream heritage since the Babylonian Exile of 586 B.C., and more so after the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. The return to Jerusalem was prayed for in the thrice-daily prayers. The most hallowed of the daily prayers, the Eighteen Blessings, says it very plainly.

> And return in Your mercy to Jerusalem Your city, and dwell within it as You have promised, and build her soon, in our days, to be built forever. And speedily establish therein the throne of David. Blessed are You, O God, rebuilder of Jerusalem.
>
> *(From* Shmóyne-ésre *[Shemoneh-Esrei], the Eighteen Blessings of the daily prayer book.)*

The transformation from prayer to a readiness to leave behind house and kin and migrate to a dangerous desert-like setting required great courage. In the later years of the nineteenth century, idealists willing to "go to fight the Turk," as the Yiddish saying went, seemed incurable dreamers. The nineteenth-century East European Zionist movement was the theoretical and ideological adjunct

of much of the modern Hebrew literature that was developing. Zionism became a serious political movement with an impetus from assimilated and more worldly western Ashkenazic Jews, the most famous of whom was the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), a native of Budapest who relocated in his teens to Vienna. Herzl inherited the "Berlin Haskalah" type of antipathy toward Yiddish. But a Western Jew could never imagine speaking Hebrew as a daily language, either. In his classic work on the Zionist dream, written in German in the middle of the 1890s, he included a section on the language of the new state.

> It could perhaps occur to someone that it will be an obstacle that we no longer have a common language. After all, we are not going to start speaking Hebrew to each other! Who among us knows enough Hebrew to ask for a train ticket in that language? This can't happen. Nevertheless, the whole question is straightforward. Everybody preserves the language which is the cherished homeland of his mind. Switzerland is the ultimate example of the feasibility of a federation of languages. Over there [in our state] we will remain exactly what we are now, and we will not stop loving, with a sense of longing, our home countries from which we have been driven out.

Well, it didn't take a genius to figure out that Herzl was saying that civilized German Jews would continue to speak German in their new state. Knowing full well that many millions of East European Jews spoke Yiddish, and that they were the community who provided close to 100 percent of the modest circles of new Zionist settlers in Palestine, Herzl could not leave Yiddish out of the discussion, nor could he bring himself to mention Yiddish by name, even a condescending name. The language he wants to allude to is lost in the plural "jargons." Herzl continues:

> We will rid ourselves of the ugly and stunted Jargons, those ghetto languages that we now make use of. They were the sly languages of prisoners. Our schoolteachers will turn their attention to this matter. Daily life will see to it that one language becomes established as the primary language, without any coercion. Our peoplehood is after all a special and unique one.

> We acknowledge our belonging together only in the sense of sharing an inherited religion.
>
> (*Theodor Herzl,* Der Judenstaat: Versuch einer modernen Loesung der juedischen Frage [*The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question*]. *Vienna, 1896.*)

Had Zionism been left to Herzl, in other words, there would be no Hebrew-speaking state in the historic Land of Israel. Although pointing it out is not politically correct nowadays, the State of Israel was built almost entirely by Yiddish-speaking East European Jews who were able in their deepest soul to "translate" the erstwhile Jewish readiness to die for God and his Torah into a modern kind of nationalism that entailed rejecting their mother tongue and the culture of their parents, families, towns, and civilization. In the twenty-first century, this observation should not draw the charge of anti-Zionism (or worse). Such a radical idea as ditching one's native language in favor of one that just about nobody speaks, and leaving a built-up country with a population that includes millions of one's own people to take one's chances with deserts, malaria, and hostile armies could not be realized in the absence of an obstinate, uncompromising fervor. The actual "first revival" of Hebrew as a spoken daily, exclusive language, could only be accomplished by a Yiddish-speaking East European Jew born into and steeped in traditional Ashkenazic Jewish trilingual culture, a person who would be fierce in his determination to succeed. He was born in Luzhik (or Luzhke) in Lithuania (now Luzhki, Belarus). He was a Litvak known in his youth as Léyzerke Perlman (1858–1922); Léyzer and Léyzerke are Yiddish forms of the classical Eliezer. He came from a Chabad family and was later influenced by maskilic ideas at a yeshiva in the nearby city Polotsk, and by Russian nationalist thought during a visit to Paris. He adopted the pseudonym Ben-Yehuda (son of Judah) and joined the Hebraist wing of the Haskalah in the 1870s as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. In 1879, he published his essay "A Burning Question" in the Hebrew journal *Ha-shákhar*. That essay was pivotal in promoting the idea of actually moving to the Land of Israel and building a new Hebrew-based culture there, thereby creating the conditions on the ground for a future state. Ben-Yehuda laid it out plain and simple in the well-rehearsed terms of East European nationalism. The Jews must

have their own country and language like everyone else, and the only acceptable language is Hebrew.

When Ben-Yehuda and his wife, Deborah, arrived in Jaffa in the fall of 1881, he informed her that they and their future children would speak only Hebrew. He thus set up the first Hebrew-speaking household in a couple of thousand years, which came to full fruition when his son, Ithamar, born in 1882, became the first child to grow up speaking a kind of neo-Hebrew. It is thought that the mental anguish Deborah endured played a considerable role in her breakdown and premature death in 1891. Several months later, Ben-Yehuda married her younger sister and the household language project continued without interruption. He established a miniature Hebrew-speaking community in Jerusalem by pretending to be pious, donning the clothes of an Ultraorthodox Jew and growing his earlocks to encourage Hebrew speech among East European origin traditionalists who were the only ones who really had enough Hebrew to "play" with him. When he had enough new immigrants in his circle to drop the religious front, he did. He also succeeded in spreading an intense revulsion at Yiddish, ever fearful that the survival of Yiddish would hamper the possibility of Hebrew becoming the one Jewish language. The loathing of Yiddish among East European native-Yiddish speaking Zionists in Palestine, who were actually speaking Hebrew, was incalculably more bitter than anything seen in the Mendelssohnian circle in late-eighteenth-century Germany or their East European followers in the nineteenth. The leaders of the Jewish settlement in Palestine and then Israel who succeeded in building the renewed Jewish state were almost unanimously driven to eradicate what they considered the greatest cultural threat to their plans: the third major language of Jewish history, Yiddish—their mother tongue. That by the early twentieth century Yiddish was gaining recognition as the language of a major new literature only made the Zionist–Hebraist leaders more determined to obliterate it. Yiddish names were made out to be ugly and had to be changed by anyone seeking respect in the new Hebrew society. Using "translative" equivalents, a Blumke Goldberg could become Shoshana Har-Hazaháv and Berl Gottesman could become Dov Bar-El. The various thousand-year-old Ashkenazic pronunciations of

Hebrew in all their intricacy and nuance were demonized as "ugly," "wrong," "ignorant." The Arabic-engendered pronunciation of Hebrew prayers and names by Middle Eastern Jews was accepted as the only correct standard. The resulting Middle Eastern (now Israeli) pronunciation is often called Sephardic, though it is a misnomer; most non-Ashkenazic Jews in the Middle East, many hailing from ancient and proud communities, were not in any sense Sephardim, who by definition are descendants of preexpulsion Sephardic—Spanish and Portuguese—Jewry.

In a deep sense, the Zionists had that historically singular and enormous strength of character, determination, and commitment to succeed at authentic nation building in the most unlikely circumstances. They left familiar environments, family, and friends to move to a dangerous land where malaria, swamplands, desert, and armed foes lurked. They created a kind of golem: a proud, new Jewish-derived people who became *Israelis*, leaving their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic Jewishness far behind. They would prove to themselves and the world that the "old Jew," whom they considered passive, hapless, effeminate, who jabbered that ugly jargon, would be replaced in the ancient homeland. The Israeli would till the soil and defend the land, speaking a Middle Eastern–sounding revived form of the ancient language. Back in Eastern Europe, though, and in other migration centers such as America, where there were powerful Zionist movements, the number of people who spoke Hebrew in daily life remained at zero, although the development of Hebrew school systems, periodicals, and literature continued to flourish.

STAY WHERE YOU ARE, WITH HUMANISM, IN YIDDISH

The new Yiddish movement received its first major impetus from writers who were producing brand-new masterpieces in the language. By the 1880s, they were using Yiddish with a defiant pride, not in the formerly apologetic spirit of having to use it to communicate with the masses. The gratification that was evolving in the accomplishments of Yiddish went hand-in-hand with developments

(and, looking back, ridiculousness) in the years following the 1908 Yiddish language conference at Chernowitz. The scene is a Jewish meeting in his prototypical shtetl, Kasrílevke.

> The [Yiddish] poet sat on the dais [of the town meeting], and in his capacity as chairman politely gave a knock on the table and opened the proceedings.
>
> "Khavéyrim un khávertes!" [Gentlemen and Ladies!]
>
> But he couldn't get out more than these two-three words. They didn't let him. Who didn't let him? Those who are against Yiddish. They hate Yiddish, because Yiddish is "Zhargón" and Zhargón is—feh! They started shouting in protest.
>
> "Ivrít! Hebréyish!" [Ivrít! Hebrew!]
>
> Now this poet with the thick black hair is not some timid little schoolboy who gets scared of a protest. Still he got a little confused. He gave himself a pat on the belly, straightened out his vest and once again, as if the shouts had nothing to do with him, said, in a slightly louder voice:
>
> "Khavéyrim un khávertes!"
>
> An even bigger commotion broke out in the hall, with banging, whistling and all kinds of screams and shouts:
>
> "Ivrít! Ivrít! Ivrít!"
>
> It would appear that this was organized from before. This was the work of the Hebraists in Kasrílevke who prepared their demonstration against Yiddish. And even the holy prayer *Shma-Yisróel* wouldn't have helped. The poet had to leave the podium in shame, and his place was taken by the young writer with the acne face in his old jacket, and he too acting on his own, not waiting for anyone to appoint him, gave a knock on the table and started out in Hebrew.
>
> "Rabotáy!" [Gentlemen!]
>
> Not "Rabóysay" as we say it, but actually "Rabotáy" the way they say it over there in the Land of Israel. As it happens, the young writer with the old jacket has a resounding voice, and his "Rabotáy!" rang out like a bell. But what, he didn't get any further than this one word. They didn't let him continue.
>
> Now this was already the work of Kasrílevke's Yiddishists who started a demonstration against Hebrew. It would appear that this too was organized from before and with the same means, in other words, people started to twist and shout, pound with their feet and yell at the top of their lungs. It verily

turned into a disturbance. The shouts reached up to heaven. The walls began to tremble and the windows were echoing:

"Mikhnatáyim! [Trousers!] Lokshn-kóyletsh! [Challah with noodles, play on *loshn-kóydesh* = the sacred language = Hebrew, the point being that this new dialect from the Middle East is *not* real Hebrew.]

"Yiddish! Yiddish! Yiddish!"

At that moment, God put it into the head of one of the Hebraists to throw a bomb. He yelled out among all the other shouts:

"Chernowitz!"

Now when you think about it, what's the big deal? What is so explosive about the word "Chernowitz?" Chernowitz is no more and no less than some town in Bukovina, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, that two countries claim as their own and keep chasing the other out of town. One day it belongs to one of them and the next day to the other. . . .

Funny people, this new generation in Kasrílevke. Such very touchy people, full of caprices and so quick to get so furious.

(Sholem-Aléykhem, Kasrílevker progrés *[Progress in Kasrílevke], 1914–1915, which usually appears in the volume* Fun Karílevke *of the various multivolume editions.)*

Sholem Aleichem vividly captures the full-fledged politicization of the words for "Yiddish" and "Hebrew" and the division of would-be modernists along the lines of language. The curious insults from both sides are revealing. The word *zhargón* in this sense had been picked up from French by the German anti-Semites of the eighteenth century, and it went from their parlance into that of the German Jewish Enlightenment proponents. From there it spread in the early nineteenth century to East European *maskílim* as a term of derision for the vernacular. By the later nineteenth century, it had become a neutral or positive term in Yiddish itself, very much in the sense of "vernacular" or "folk language." And then the earlier "curse word" feel of *Zhargón* was picked up anew by the Yiddish-speaking Hebraists.

Zionists in the Land of Israel revived spoken Hebrew with the Near Eastern pronunciation (mislabeled "Sephardic"), which differs markedly from East European Ashkenazic Hebrew. While *ívris* was one of the traditional terms for "Hebrew," *ivrít* was a word from the new language of the Zionists in Palestine. While Ashkenazic Hebrew

(and Yiddish) distinguish between the ancient Hebrew-Aramaic sounds *t* and *th* (as *t* and *s*), the two collapsed into a single *t* sound in most Middle Eastern pronunciations of Hebrew (compare *shabbos* to *shabbat*). Here the Palestinian (proto-Israeli) pronunciation demanded by the Zionists is made fun of by use of another word that has the letter *samekh*, pronounced *s* by everybody, but here purposely mispronounced with *t*, in a hypercorrection that causes hilarity, not least because of the word chosen, *mikhnasáyim* (trousers), which is purposely misrendered as *mikhnatáyim* by the Kasrílevke Yiddishists. But the most explosive word of all was the name of a certain town in Eastern Europe.

The Chernowitz language conference was held in Chernowitz from Sunday morning, August 30, to Thursday evening, September 3, 1908, and it continues to be celebrated by Yiddishists as a symbolic turning point in the history of the language. The two people who made it happen were Yiddishist philosopher Chaim Zhitlovsky and (in one of the great ironies in the story of Yiddish) the Vienna-born German-speaking Jewish philosopher Nathan Birnbaum (1864–1937), one of the founders of Zionism, who balked at its negative attitude toward Diaspora Jewry. Birnbaum famously said "Israel comes before Zion." After (it is said) coining the word "Zionism," he went on to coin "Yiddishism" and became a leading thinker of Diaspora nationalism. Birnbaum was the prime moving force behind the conference and delivered its opening speech in a limping, Germanized Yiddish that was lampooned in the press.

Birnbaum delighted in the development of Yiddishism from the feelings of scattered individuals to a movement.

> We have the joy to see in this hall those great Yiddish writers who are respected even by the opponents and detractors of our language, who nevertheless show them great respect. . . .
>
> I hereby open the first conference for the Yiddish language!

And with his gavel, the respected Nathan Birnbaum took Yiddishism out of the realm of mere opponents of Zionism to build a coalition of forces that included writers, socialists, religious people, many

who were also sympathetic to Zionism, and the various nonaligned who could see his vision of an East European Jewish nation developing its culture in its own language.

More cachet was provided by Peretz's opening address. As if to throw all his socialist activism out the window, Peretz explicitly built the notion that as a modern literary language of East European Jewry, Yiddish was in fact established by the Baal Shem Tov and Nachman of Bratslav.

> Yiddish didn't start with Isaac-Meir Dik. The genesis is to be found in the Hasidic tale. . . . The first writer of the people was Reb Nachman of Bratslav with his "Story of Seven Beggars." It also comes from the awakening and demands of the Jewish woman, the Jewish wife, the Jewish girl. That gave rise to the "women's books." The "translation language" became our "mother tongue." . . . Then the Jewish worker came on the scene. . . and the modern Yiddish book came into being.
>
> But all of that would not have brought us together here. If we have gathered from far-flung lands and states to proclaim our Yiddish as a language with rights to equality with all other languages, it is because of another factor. The state, to which small peoples are brought on the altar, as children to Moloch in ancient times, that state, which in view of the interests of the ruling classes and peoples had to negate and level everything out—one army, one language, one school, one police force, one set of rights for the police—that state is losing its gloss. . . .
>
> The modern word is the nation, not the fatherland! Our own culture, not borders and hunter-guards. . . .
>
> And we say to the world: We are the Jewish people and Yiddish is our language. . . . And in this language we will gather together our treasures, create our culture, stimulate our soul, and unite ourselves over time and space.

The conference concluded with various declarations about education, translations, and other projects, but the debate centered on the question of whether Yiddish is *a* national language of the Jewish people. The resolution that was passed reads:

> The first conference for the Yiddish language recognizes Yiddish as a national language of the Jewish people, and calls for its political, social and cultural

> equal rights. Moreover, the conference finds it necessary to state that each participant in the conference, and of its resulting organization, has the freedom to regard the Hebrew language according to his personal convictions.
>
> *(From the conference proceedings compiled by Max Weinreich and Zalmen Reyzen, and published by the Yivo in Vilna as* Di érshte yídishe shprákh-konferénts *[The First Yiddish Language Conference]. Vilna, 1931.)*

This "big tent" resolution enabled the new Yiddish cultural movement to include the many who quietly believed in Hebrew for Palestine but Yiddish for Eastern Europe and its "Jewish colonies" in America and elsewhere. But, as frequently happens, the media (principally the newspaper reporters at the conference) latched on to an interesting headline not in the conference's actual concluding statement but in the rejected minority resolution that had been proposed by Esther: "We recognize Yiddish as *the* national language of the Jewish people."

Esther, however, accepted the majority wording, which proclaimed Yiddish *a* national Jewish language. But the press reports sensationalized the "firebrand lady socialist from Minsk" as a sort of Lady Macbeth of Yiddish, and the Hebraists, in particular, began to publish attacks far and wide on "that woman and the Yiddishists" who all "hate Hebrew." The "primeval sin of Esther Frumkin" would be thrown up for almost a century as a pretext for suppression of Yiddish, particularly in Israel, but also by major international Jewish organizations that were constructing a purist "Hebrew and Hebrew only" curriculum for Diaspora Jewish schools, a curriculum that survives largely unreformed in Hebrew day schools around the world in the twenty-first century (though nowadays more from inertia than anything else).

After the conference, Nathan Birnbaum, cofounder of Zionism and resident of Vienna and New York, remained in Chernowitz for several years, briefly making it the symbolic world address of Yiddish. In 1910, he organized thousands of Bundists, Zionists, and Labor Zionists to march on city hall demanding the right of Jews to list Yiddish as their daily language in the nationwide (Austro-Hungarian) census. That particular effort failed, but the march elevated the rights of Yiddish in Eu-

rope to a major Jewish rights issue of interest far beyond the growing Yiddishist sector. Birnbaum's enormous prestige, and the considerable credit he still had with Zionists, was behind this. He had been active in German-speaking proto-Zionist circles from the 1880s and was one of the heroes of the First Zionist Congress in Basel (1897). But this was one of the rare examples of "cross-breeding." In general, Chernowitz as a concept led to bitter new attacks on Yiddish by Hebrew writers. It was arguably the beginning of the end of the bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew writer in the spirit of a Mendele or a Peretz who wrote in both languages throughout their careers. There were important exceptions, but generally writers who were starting out in those years had to forget about becoming famous in both languages. If they wrote "serious stuff" in Yiddish, their bona-fides as Zionists would be questioned (even if they settled in Palestine). And if they became major writers in the new kind of Hebrew, the left wing of the Yiddish establishment would be just as suspicious. In short, two of the three languages of Ashkenaz had come to symbolize conflicting worldviews, and among the intelligentsia at least they were going through a messy divorce.

The Chernowitz Conference provided an extraordinary impetus for the meteoric rise of twentieth century Yiddish literature. The gathering of famous writers (including Sholem Ash, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, H. D. Nomberg, Y. L. Peretz, Avrom Reyzen, and Chaim Zhitlovsky) from different countries to proclaim Yiddish a national language gave aspiring Yiddish writers, teachers, and scholars around the world confidence that they too were part of an international cultural movement. The Hebrew–Yiddish debates ignited by Chernowitz gave both camps impetus to develop their school systems. But the debates in the popular press and circulated correspondence tended to be acrimonious, and the polemics became known as the language dispute, called *riv leshóynes* in Yiddish and *riv leshonót* in Israeli Hebrew. In the Diaspora it remained in the realm of ink and involved no Jewish-on-Jewish violence, unlike the situation in Palestine. In Eastern Europe, two kinds of modern Jewish day schools arose. One featured Zionist education in Hebrew (recognizing that the everyday language of the children was Yiddish). The second was Yiddishist education in Yiddish (with Hebrew often taught too). In their zeal to show that each language could

Abstractly speaking, it might have been predicted that in light of the annihilation of 6 million Jews, the vast majority of whom were Yiddish speakers, there would have been a swift reappraisal of Yiddish in America. But it did not happen. The Holocaust itself became a major issue only many years later, starting perhaps with the 1960 English translation called *Night*, of Elie Wiesel's Yiddish book *Un di velt hot geshvígn* (And the World Kept Silent; the original Yiddish version appeared in 1956; the French version, called *La Nuit* came out in 1958). If anything, the cliché "they went to the slaughter like sheep" was heard at every turn. Whatever anger there was at Germany, Nazism, and all the collaborators, and whatever respect for the victims, that respect did not extend to the living Yiddish civilization that had been annihilated, which was the civilization of the parents or grandparents of millions of American Jews.

The effect of the Holocaust was to galvanize support for the new State of Israel, which became a demonstrable necessity for the physical survival of Jews in the wake of the catastrophe in Europe. That obvious urgency did become clear, but the American Jewish establishment, working closely with the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization, rushed ahead with a program to "Israelicize" American Jewish culture too. Synagogue after synagogue and school after school, whose members and pupils were often almost all of East European heritage, switched to Israeli ("Sephardic") Hebrew, labeling the Ashkenazic rendition of Hebrew and Aramaic "wrong," "ghetto drone," or "bastardized." The successful Hebrew day school systems that rose in America not only excluded Yiddish as a subject but developed a curriculum that deprived the American Jewish child of any knowledge of the literary and cultural achievements of Yiddish and its literature. To this day, textbooks in these schools often include Yiddish stories by Sholem Aleichem and other Yiddish writers translated into Hebrew, with no mention of the fact that they are translations. Most Hebrew day school pupils have no idea about the existence of American (or any other) serious Yiddish literature. They may have to study the minutiae of the geography of the Negev, but have no incentive to be curious about where their own immediate ancestors came from. "I don't know, somewhere in Russia or Poland" becomes a eu-

phemism for "Who cares." It is a total negation of the European period in Jewish history, and of Yiddish language and culture especially.

When the Hebraicizing, anti-Yiddish, anti-European Jewish mentality took hold of the American Jewish establishment, it meant that Yiddish names sometimes had to be dropped altogether. Most often, the "work" is carried out by American Hebrew teachers. A girl called Gitl after her late grandmother is told in New York that her new name is "really" Tova, and a Zisl named for her great-grandmother might be told that she will henceforth be known in Jewish studies classes as Metuka (both "translative equivalents" in the Israeli style). The issue arises less with boys because most Yiddish boys' names have biblical, hence Hebrew, equivalents, and the difference is often one of pronunciation (as in Nóson becoming Natán, or Shólem turning to Shalóm).

But not all boys' names are "Hebraically pure." One of the more common Yiddish male first names is Hirsh (Hirshke, Hirshl, Hersh, Hershl, and more variants). Numerous American Jewish Harrys, Harolds, and Howards (in earlier times Hymans and Harveys too) were often named after a late relative called Hirsh. In the Old Country, the Hebrew-Hebrew *Tsvi* (which, like Hirsh, means "deer") would have been used in synagogue. But in America, and especially in the Hebrew educational infrastructure, Hirsh was often banished for its too Yiddish, too ethnically Jewish feel, leaving Tsvi for bar-mitzvah and Howard, or whatever, for the rest of life.

Taken historically, socially, and symbolically, these are clear indications of the continuing feeling of being "less than comfortable" with the Jewish names of people in the Yiddish language, and more generally, with the language and culture in the immediate background of millions of American Jews. And as long as Yiddish as a serious subject continues to be (effectively) boycotted by the vast majority in the Hebrew day school movement in America, there will be no change in the lack of knowledge and respect for the East European Jewish heritage among those privileged to have an intensive private Jewish education.

Even the naturally evolved American Jewish Sabbath greeting, *Good Shabbos*, not to mention the more authentic Yiddish *A gut Shábes*, is frowned upon in many communities by "spiritual leaders." It is replaced not by the genuine Israeli *shabát shalóm* (not easy for an

American of European family background to decently reproduce) but by the flat "absolute minimum American variant," *shih-BAT shih-LOME* (rhymes with "the bats in Rome"). But can there not be respect for one's own heritage alongside support for Israel? Does wishing someone *A gut Shábes!* make them any less a supporter of Israel? Surely the time has come for the strongest support of Israel not to be confused with anachronistic attempts to get rid of the East European Jewish culture that is natural to the family heritage of the overwhelming majority of American Jews.

That anti-Yiddish bias, and the phenomenon of a Jewish education cleansed of the Yiddish heritage, continues apace today. But the attitude to Yiddish among large segments of the American Jewish public has been drifting toward a much more sympathetic stance. Starting in the late 1960s, there was a revival of interest in things Jewish, either in parallel to the "black is beautiful" movement among African Americans, or in the wake of the Six Day War, or both. There was more of a sentimental attachment to the language and culture of grandparents and parents who had come of age before the war in Eastern Europe and were now dying in ever greater numbers. The death of a parent was probably the single most potent factor in igniting curiosity about Yiddish from the last third of the twentieth century and onward. Additionally, there was a noticeably increased confidence and collective power among American Jewry during the Kennedy years and beyond, meaning that there was progressively less embarrassment about things that are deeply Jewish (like Yiddish).

In addition to Wiesel's 1960 *Night*, there was the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and the reopening that year of Simon Wiesenthal's Nazi-hunting operation in Vienna. These events seized the interest of many American Jews. The time was ripe for a new look at Yiddish, and two models were on offer: an academic Yiddish for small numbers of university students and, at the other end of the spectrum, a popular interest in the humor and wit of the language that was largely fostered by Leo Calvin Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish*, first published in 1968. While academics looked askance at its focus on "Yinglish," the patois of mixed Yiddish-English parlance and its charming concoctions, it enabled many readers, entering from a homey, comic perspective, to