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# Revivalism

*Yiddish, once the epitome of uncool, is making a comeback*

By AW  
Photos by Avi Levine

Walk down Tel Aviv's Rothschild Street and you might notice a hipster wearing a T-shirt printed with the word "Treyf," a woman carrying a "Plastic, Shmastic" tote bag, or posters announcing the latest "Oy Division" performance. Yiddish, once the epitome of uncool in Israel – representing the old shtetl life and a backwards way of thinking and dressing – is back, and in a big way.

To the outsider, the revival might seem surface level, no deeper than the "kvetch" and "shmatta" magnets that make up the Yiddish magnetic poetry set. But dig a little deeper and you'll find that the revival has substance.

"It's important that it's a hipster thing," says Asaf Galay, who often gets calls requesting funny ideas for Yiddish T-shirt slogans, "but we're more interested in the intellectual aspects of Yiddish culture." Galay, 32, is a self-described Yiddish activist who works at Tel Aviv's Leyvik House, a center for Yiddish culture, where he directs the branch for the Next Generation of Yiddish Lovers. For Galay, Yiddish is an important part of the Ashkenazi heritage, one that was largely ignored with the establishment of the State of Israel, whose founders launched a campaign to stamp out Yiddish and bring in Hebrew, the language of the pioneers.

To further educate younger people about the rich Yiddish history and culture, Galay founded the Movement for Ashkenazic Identity, whose members are mostly in their twenties and thirties. A few years ago, two dozen of them staged a small parade in response to the lack of Yiddish on the streets. Wearing "I heart Yiddish" T-shirts, they marched down Dizengoff Street, teaching people basic Yiddish words as they went along.

Galay and his wife Hannah have also spearheaded an effort to teach

Yiddish to elementary school children. Several years ago, Hannah began teaching an after-school Yiddish elective class for children at the nearby Tel Nordau School. The response from parents and students was so overwhelmingly positive that the principle decided to make the course mandatory, the first class of its kind at an Israeli public school.

Galay notes that the revival is strongest amongst those in their sixties and above, who heard Yiddish at home and acquired a basic vocabulary but not a deep knowledge of its grammar. There are four weekly groups studying the language at the Leyvik House alone and many more around the country. "It's very nostalgic for them," says Galay.

The nostalgia aspect is something that Mendy Cahan, 46, another prominent figure in the Yiddish movement, is keenly aware of. His focus is on setting up a space where people can connect to Yiddish on an emotional level.

In 1993, Cahan founded YUNG YiDiSH, an organization that works to preserve and transmit Yiddish culture. It is headquartered in the most unlikely of places, a huge loft space on the fifth floor of Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station, a building more well known as a home to foreign workers and the city's underbelly than as place for the preservation of Jewish culture.

Stepping into YUNG YiDiSH is like discovering the back room at a museum, or a secret hideaway imbued with a magical, mysterious quality. High concrete ceilings house bookcases upon bookcases of yellowed books. Yiddish newspapers and diaries dangle from the rafters, and tables are scattered with an impressively eclectic collection, ranging from Yiddish children's books produced in



1940s Argentina to reprints of Yiddish dictionaries from 17th century Prague. With its musty smell, the constant rumbling from buses overhead, and the sounds of trickling water coming from the indoor fountain, the space is instantly enchanting.

While Cahan doesn't have the largest collection of Yiddish books in the world – that distinction belongs to the National Yiddish Book Center in the US – he struggles to preserve the uniqueness of the books themselves. “The physicality of the books is laughed at today,” he says, “but I think they still have power and should be given their space.” YUNG YiDiSH actively lends books, and Cahan even accommodates those who live outside of Tel Aviv, such as the 103-year-old man in Eilat to whom he mails a Yiddish detective novel each week.

YUNG YiDiSH frequently hosts musical performances, lectures, and poetry readings. Recently, the Israeli band Trio Carpien performed on the small stage, which is backed not by a black curtain but by a wall of Yiddish books. The band wore three-piece suits and played early 20th century Klezmer music mixed in a healthy dose of Yiddish slapstick. The few dozen audience members ranged in age from their early twenties to late sixties, and it was striking to hear Yiddish being spoken fluently among them. Even more surprising was that the audience members were all secular.

That's the other twist on the Yiddish story: the language is alive and well in many ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel and around the world. From Mea Shearim in Jerusalem to Williamsburg, New York, Yiddish is spoken as a first language at home, in the marketplace and at schools. Yiddish games and books are still widely produced, and at YUNG YiDiSH, Yiddish versions of classic games like “Guess Who?” – characters like Bubby Landau, Chaikel,

and Rabbi Fried take the place of blond-haired Claire and kippa-less Max – are displayed alongside Yiddish journals produced in Palestine in the 1920s.

“Yiddish is in a strange predicament,” says Cahan. The language thrives in isolated pockets of ultra-Orthodoxy and is somewhat supported in academic cultures, but outside of those settings, it is longer spoken on the streets. While the Israeli government is willing to give it nominal recognition – major cities have streets named after Yiddish writers such as Mendele Mocher Sfarim, Shalom Aleichem, and Y. L. Peretz – it is unwilling to make a push to revive it as a living, breathing culture.

Now, as the last generation of Yiddish speakers are passing away, Yiddish activists like Cahan are trying to preserve whatever they can. “It's terrible how quickly a culture can disappear,” says Cahan with a deep sigh, as if the entire weight of the dying culture rested upon his shoulders.

Cahan continues to organize monthly Klezmer performances and Yiddish events, often participating as both actor and musician. At a recent pre-Passover play at the Leyvik House, a group of Hannah's students dressed up as members of a family: the girls excitedly put on lipstick, the boys wore collared shirts and blue ties, and the “grandparents” donned white wigs and shawls. They sat in front of a makeshift Passover table, complete with wine glasses, matzah, and a Passover plate. Hannah counted off (ayntz, tzvei, dray) to cue them in, and they began to sing in Yiddish, a multi-generational family – a bubbe, zeyde, children, and grandchildren – going back to their roots, if only for a few moments.

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