

Yiddish Culture: From Europe to America

INTRODUCTION

Overview:

Yiddish was the everyday language of most Jews in Eastern Europe (Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and parts of Hungary and Czechoslovakia) for 1,000 years.

The term "Yiddish" is derived from the German word for "Jewish." The most accepted (but not the only) theory of the origin of Yiddish is that it began to take shape by the 10th century as Jews from France and Italy migrated to the Rhine Valley. They developed a language that included elements of Hebrew, and French, Italian, and German dialects. In the late Middle Ages, when Jews settled in Eastern Europe, Slavic elements were incorporated into Yiddish.

The period of the early 19th century until World War II could be called "the golden age of Yiddish culture." A literary renaissance produced both Hebrew and Yiddish works by writers such as Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Seforim, and Isaac Leib Peretz. Hundreds of Yiddish newspapers and journals were published, and during the period between World War I and II, Yiddish school networks were established in Eastern Europe. A lively Yiddish theater emerged and there were even Yiddish movies. The mass immigration of Jews from Europe to America in 1881 to 1924 led to the emergence of New York City as a new center of Yiddish culture.

The destruction of European Jewry during World War II and the subsequent emigration of most of the surviving Yiddish speakers to other countries where they adopted the local vernacular nearly ended the life of Yiddish. Today, the largest concentration of Yiddish-speakers can be found in Hasidic communities in Israel and North America. The language is also enjoying a mini-revival at some universities and Jewish cultural institutions. This lesson explores the influence of the Yiddish language and culture of the past and present.

Grade Level: High School

Subjects Covered: Social Studies, World History, American History, Literature and Poetry, History of Language

Goals:

Students will appreciate the role that Yiddish language, literature, music, and theater played in the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe and Jewish immigrants in America.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- understand the origins and history of the Yiddish language in Europe and America;
- become more familiar with Yiddish by experiencing samples of Yiddish literature and music;
- analyze the role of Yiddish in the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe and America.

Suggested Time Frame:

Two 45-minute to one-hour class periods with optional additional time for presentation of extension projects.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Before you begin:

Teachers should be sure to explore all bookmarked pages of the DVD-ROM used in this lesson.

Introductory Activity: What is Yiddish?

1. Begin the activity by asking students if anyone can define the term “Yiddish.” Among the questions that can be used to motivate discussion are: Who speaks/spoke Yiddish? Where was Yiddish spoken? What alphabet is it written in? The instructor will write the definitions provided by the class on the blackboard.
2. Explain that Yiddish was the primary spoken language among Eastern European Jews for 1,000 years. Yiddish incorporates elements of Hebrew, and French, Italian, and German, and Slavic languages, and is written in Hebrew characters.
3. As students learn more about Yiddish throughout the lesson, add the new information to the board.

Learning Activity 1: The Origins of Yiddish

Yiddish first developed in the Rhine Valley around the tenth century, and its origins lie with the German that was then spoken in the region; the language continued to develop over the centuries.

1. Explain that the development of Yiddish is difficult to trace, as it gradually incorporated aspects of various languages as new immigrants arrived in the region and some Jewish residents left for other countries.
2. Ask the class to keep their definitions of Yiddish in mind as they screen the multimedia presentation [Origins of Yiddish](#).

3. When the video has ended, the class will choose and listen to 5 or 6 of the examples of Yiddish that follow the main presentation.
4. Discuss the segments. Note that Yiddish-speaking Jews were a minority, living among non-Jews who spoke Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and other Slavic languages.
 - Were the class's original definitions of Yiddish correct? Revise them together as a class.
 - What distinguishes Yiddish from other languages?

Learning Activity 2: A Yiddish Renaissance in Europe

Yiddish was mainly a spoken language until the nineteenth century, when it became a language of modern literature, theater, and scholarship. Yiddish played a major role in the revival of Jewish culture in Europe.

1. Explain that at the heart of the renaissance in Jewish culture were Yiddish newspapers, journals, novels, and theater, which allowed Yiddish-speaking Jews to learn about and take part in the modern world while establishing the language as an important and respected feature of European Jewish culture.
2. View the video segment [A Literary Renaissance](#).
 - In what ways do you think Yiddish was an appropriate – or surprising – vehicle for a “renaissance in Jewish culture”?

Learning Activity 3: Yiddish Culture in America

By the late nineteenth century, much of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe and Russia was leaving the history of oppression and poverty in their native lands for the hope of freedom and success in others. More than one million Jews immigrated to the United States, bringing with them the Yiddish language and culture that have since filtered into American Jewish life.

1. Have students listen to Shlof Mayn Kind, a Yiddish lullaby about immigration to America. Note that the song was sung not only in Russia, but in America as well.
2. Explain that Yiddish culture, theater, and literature were reborn in the United States. Students will view the multimedia presentation [Yiddish Culture](#).
 - Discuss the role of Yiddish theater and newspapers in the lives of American Yiddish-speaking Jews.
3. Yiddish literature helped the Jews deal with the difficulties of immigration by reflecting and giving voice to the changes in their lives.

Divide the class into small groups to explore examples of American Yiddish poetry in the multimedia activity [American Yiddish Poetry](#). Each group or student will select one poem to study.

4. If there is time, reconvene the class to discuss the poems they have studied.
 - How did Yiddish poetry reflect the experiences of Jewish immigrants?

Culminating Activities:

Assign one or several of the following projects to be carried out by individual students or small teams. The completed projects will be presented in class:

1. Students may assemble an anthology of examples of Yiddish literature and/or poetry in translation or prepare a portrait of a Yiddish writer, including a basic biographical profile, a bibliography, and two short samples of his/her work in translation. Note: This will require library research since there is very little available Yiddish literature in translation available on the Internet:

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org/+10038>. The Jewish Reader. National Yiddish Book Center. Some excerpts of works by Yiddish writers in translation are available here.

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org/+10038>. Audio Library, National Yiddish Book Center. Audio versions of Yiddish stories by Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz:
On Account of a Hat by Sholem Aleichem.
If Not Higher by I.L. Peretz.

Suggested library sources include:

Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds. *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*. (Schocken, 1987)

Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds. *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*. (Penguin, 1990)

Ken Frieden, ed. *Classic Yiddish Stories of S.Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz* (Syracuse University Press, 2004)

The I.L. Peretz Reader. (Schocken, 1996)

World According To Itzik: Selected Poetry And Prose Of Itzik Manger. (Yale University Press, 2002)

2. Have the class discuss and take on a project about Yiddish in American culture today. Ask students if they've heard or seen Yiddish in mainstream America – in

a magazine, book, or newspaper, in a speech by a celebrity or politician, etc. Try to find some examples to show to the students. Ask students if they would have known these were Yiddish words if they'd read them on their own, or if they think non-Jewish people would know they were Yiddish words. The class may then do one or both of the following:

- a) Split into groups. Each group will choose a short list of popular Yiddish words or phrases (some suggestions are listed below) and take a poll of their fellow students, friends, and family to find out if they know what these words mean. The class will reconvene and share their results.
- b) Each group will compile a short written report, including the definitions of their words or phrases, their poll results, and if possible, examples of their words in American newspapers, books, etc. Students will write individual essays about what they think the absorption of Yiddish words into mainstream American culture says about the place of Jews in American society today.

Examples of Yiddish words:

alter kocker (an old person, or a person who is inept at something)
bobbe meiseh (old wives tale)
chutzpah (nerve or gall)
farklempt (choked up)
klutzy/klutz (clumsy/a clumsy person)
kop (head)
kvetch (a complainer or whiner)
maven (an expert or authority)
megillah (story)
mentsch (a good person)
meshugah/meshugenah (crazy)
mishpacha (family)
naches (pleasure or joy)
nosh/nosher (a snack/someone who snacks a lot)
punim (face)
schmaltzy (corny or overly sentimental)
shayna (pretty)
shlep (to drag or carry a heavy or unnecessary thing)
shmendrick (a simpleton)
shmooze (to chat or engage in conversation with friends)
yenta (a gossip)

Extension Activities:

1. The class might screen a Yiddish film, such *Tevye der Milkhiker*, available with Yiddish subtitles from Jewish Heritage Video Collection sites (www.jhvc.org). The instructor may wish to use Notes for the Course Leader: Yiddish Culture (Jewish Heritage Video Collection) as a guide for discussing the film (http://www.jhvc.org/courses/course_notes/yiddish.pdf, pages 2-3.)
2. Klezmer music is an excellent example of how Yiddish culture was distinctly Jewish and yet open to other cultural influences. Students who are interested in music can prepare a short presentation on klezmer music and play samples for the class.
3. Students who are interested in exploring Yiddish culture as an encounter with modernity and a reflection of changes in Jewish life can build PowerPoint presentations or posters with examples of Yiddish poetry, radio programs, and graphic design with examples drawn from the following Internet resources and books:

<http://yiddishradioproject.org/>. The Yiddish Radio Project. Copyright © 2002 Sound Portraits Productions.

How do the radio program “Rabbi Rubin’s Court of the Air” (<http://www.yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits/rubin/>) and/or “The Jewish Philosopher” (<http://www.yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits/lutsky/>) reflect the encounter of Jewish immigrants with American culture and new conditions in life?

http://www.yivoinstitute.org/digital_exhibitions/index.php?mcid=77 . The Power of Persuasion: Jewish Posters from Prewar Poland. Copyright ©2005, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

Look for political posters or posters about cultural events that might be bringing new ideas to their audiences.

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org/+10298>. This Month in Yiddish Literature. National Yiddish Book Center.

Look for examples of writers whose work focused on social and political commentary or who were dedicated to breaking new artistic ground with their work.

4. The following organizations have Yiddish educational programs and may provide opportunities for field trips or classroom visits:

Dora Teitelboim Center for Jewish Culture (Florida)

<http://www.yiddishculture.org/>

Folksbiene Yiddish Theater (New York)

<http://www.folksbiene.org/>

KlezKanada (Canada)

<http://www.klezkanada.com/site/>

Living Traditions: Community-Based Yiddish Folk Culture (New York)

<http://www.livingtraditions.org/>

National Yiddish Book Center (Massachusetts)

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org/>

Workmen's Circle (U.S. and Canada)

<http://www.circle.org/index.shtml>

Yiddishkayt Los Angeles (California)

<http://www.yiddishkaytla.org/>

MATERIALS

Web Sites

<http://yiddishradioproject.org/>. The Yiddish Radio Project. Copyright © 2002 Sound Portraits Productions.

<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein/>. A Garment Workers Legacy: The Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry. Copyright © 2001, McGill University.

http://www.yivoinstitute.org/digital_exhibitions/index.php?mcid=77. The Power of Persuasion: Jewish Posters from Prewar Poland. Copyright ©2005, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org/+10298>. This Month in Yiddish Literature. National Yiddish Book Center.

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org/+10038>. The Jewish Reader. National Yiddish Book Center. Some excerpts of works by Yiddish writers in translation are available here.

<http://yiddishbookcenter.org/+10038>. Audio Library, National Yiddish Book Center. Audio versions of Yiddish stories by Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz:

On Account of a Hat by Sholem Aleichem.

If Not Higher by I.L. Peretz.

National Center for Jewish Film (<http://www.jewishfilm.org/>).

Notes for the Course Leader: See “Yiddish Culture” (Jewish Heritage Video Collection) as a guide for discussing the film

(http://www.jhvc.org/courses/course_notes/yiddish.pdf, pages 2-3.)

<http://www.belfsmusic.com/>. Belf’s Rumanian Orchestra.

<http://www.budowitz.com/>. A Short History of Klezmer Music, by Merlin Shepherd.

STANDARDS

From Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL):

Historical Understanding

Standard 2. Understands the historical perspective.

Level IV [Grade 9-12] Benchmark 11. (Addressed in all Learning Activities)

Knows how to perceive past events with historical empathy

(<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/reference.asp?item=benchmark&BenchmarkID=184&subjectID=3>)

United States History

Standard 17. Understands massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity Level IV [Grade 9-12] Benchmark 1. (Addressed in all Learning Activity #1 and Culminating Activity)

Understands challenges immigrants faced in society in the late 19th century (e.g., experiences of new immigrants from 1870 to 1900, reasons for hostility toward the new immigrants, restrictive measures against immigrants, the tension between American ideals and reality)

(<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/topicsDetail.asp?topicsID=874&subjectID=5>)

World History

Standard 11. Understands major global trends from 1000 BCE to 300 CE

Level IV [Grade 9-12] Benchmark 2. (Addressed in all Learning Activities)

Understands patterns of social and cultural continuity in various societies (e.g., ways in which peoples maintained traditions and resisted external challenges in the context of increasing interregional contacts)

(<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/topicsDetail.asp?topicsID=841&subjectID=6>)

Arts and Communication

Standard 4. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication

Level IV [Grade 9-12] Benchmark 4. (Addressed in all Learning Activities)

Knows ways in which various media forms throughout history (e.g., broadsheets, photography, newspapers, news broadcasts) have reflected or conveyed human events

(<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/reference.asp?item=benchmark&BenchmarkID=4562&subjectID=26>)

DVD-ROM BOOKMARKS

Origins of Yiddish (Video > The Crucible of Europe > Europe Awakens > Jewish Prosperity > Explore Topic > Origins of Yiddish)

A Literary Renaissance (Video > Roads From the Ghetto > Shaping a Future > Literary Renaissance > Play)

Shlof Mayn Kind (Video > The Golden Land > Mass Immigration > Coming to America > Explore Topic > Play > Hit space bar > America in Folk Culture > Shlof Mayn Kind)

Yiddish Culture (Video > The Golden Land > Mass Immigration > Yiddish Culture)

American Yiddish Poetry (Video > The Golden Land > Mass Immigration > Yiddish Culture > Explore Topic > American Yiddish Poetry)

Klezmer (Concise Judaica > Klezmer)