

# The Culture of Yiddish: An Introduction

Department of Jewish Studies  
Fall 2016

Jewish Studies 01:563:245  
German 01:470:280

Tuesday / Thursday, 4:30 - 5:50 PM  
Miller Hall (14 College Avenue), Room 116

## Prof. Jeffrey Shandler

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### Office Hours:

September–October: Tuesday / Thursday 3:30 – 4:30 PM and by appointment  
November–December: Tuesday / Thursday 1:30 – 2:30 PM and by appointment

**This course fulfills Core Learning Goal AHq: “Understand the nature of human languages and their speakers.”**

### Course description:

This course will provide students with an overview of the language and culture of Yiddish, the traditional vernacular of Ashkenazi Jews for over 1,000 years. As a language of a diasporic, minority community of speakers who have always been in some way multilingual, Yiddish provides exemplary opportunities to consider the relation of language and culture in a complex dynamic. The course will provide students with an overview of the history of the development of Yiddish as one of over a score of diasporic Jewish languages and as the Jewish language to have attained the most extensive reach. Students will learn about the linguistic structure of Yiddish as a fusion language, uniting components of Germanic, Romance, Slavic and Semitic languages; its European geography of dialects; and the multilingual nature of its speech community, both internally and in relation to their neighbors. The course will continue with an overview of key areas of Yiddish cultural activity from the early modern period to the present. Special attention will be paid to ideological investments in language use as they relate to other aspects of Jewish life. Finally, the course will consider the role of Yiddish both during the Holocaust—when half of the speech community was murdered and its European cultural center destroyed—and afterwards, as both Jews and others forge new relations with the language, which are often centered less on its role as a vernacular than on its symbolic value.

Students will read primary works that exemplify key moments in Yiddish culture as well as secondary material providing background on Yiddish language and culture. All course readings and materials will be in English. No prior knowledge of linguistics, of Yiddish or any other language, or of Jewish history or religion is required.

### Course learning goals:

- Students will acquire an overview of the history of Yiddish language from its origins to the present and of the variety of its uses in Jewish culture.
- Through the case of Yiddish, students will learn about different notions of the interrelation of language, culture, and peoplehood.
- Students will learn how to analyze primary texts related to Yiddish language and culture in relation to secondary literature on the topic.

### Course requirements:

- Attendance, preparation for, and active participation in class sessions. Students are required to prepare for in-class discussion all assigned readings. Regular attendance of class and active participation in class discussion is required. Students are expected to come to class on time; to respect the protocols of classroom conduct—e.g., turning off cell phones, not eating during class, avoiding distracting chatter; to check their Rutgers email regularly for class announcements (e.g., changes in schedule or assignments); and to turn in written work on the dates due. Students are expected to attend all classes; if you expect to miss one or two classes, please use the University absence reporting website <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/> to indicate the date and reason for your absence. An email is automatically sent to me. If for some pressing reason, you anticipate missing more than one or two classes (e.g., due to serious illness), please notify me and your dean as soon as possible.
- Midterm examination: in class, Oct. 20.
- Essay analyzing a Yiddish performance: 3-4 double-spaced pages (750-1000 words); details TBA.
- Final examination: take-home essay exam, due via email by Dec. 21.

**NOTE:** Students must do their own work and must cite properly all outside sources (readings, media works, websites, etc.) consulted in preparing written assignments. Students should review the university policy on Academic Integrity: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-at-rutgers>. Failure to comply with this policy can result in failure of the course or more severe penalties.

Course grade will be based on class attendance and participation (20%), midterm exam (25%), essay, (25%) final exam (30%). Work submitted after the deadline without an acceptable excuse (e.g., illness, family emergency) will be penalized.

### Course schedule:

**NOTE:** Course schedule is subject to change. If a student misses a class, it is the student's responsibility to check with the professor regarding any changes in assignments, etc.

All readings are posted on the course sakai site. Students are required to bring copies of in-class materials to class for discussion.

\* = selections from a larger text

### Course sessions

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading assignment (Secondary)</b>	<b>In-class readings (Primary)</b>
9/6	Introduction		
9/8	Historical background of Yiddish	Harshav, chapter 1	
9/13	Linguistic background of Yiddish	Harshav, chapter 2	
9/15	Early Yiddish texts	Katz, chapter 3	<i>Akedas Yitskhok</i> (The Binding of Isaac); Genesis 22
9/20	Early Yiddish books	Katz, chapter 4	<i>Mayse-bukh</i> (The Book of Tales)*; <i>Mayse-bukh</i> title page
9/22	The “women’s Bible” in Yiddish	Bilik	<i>Tsene-rene</i> (the “Women’s Bible”)*; Genesis 1
9/27	Yiddish women’s prayers	Weissler	<i>Tkhines</i> (petitional prayers)*
9/29	Hasidim and Yiddish	Schwartz	Nahman of Bratslav, “Loss of the Princess”; Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*
10/4	NO CLASS: Rosh Hashanah		
10/6	The Haskalah and Yiddish	Parush	Dik, “Pious Tirtse”
10/11	NO CLASS: Yom Kippur		
10/13	Letter writing in Yiddish	Nakhimovsky & Newman	<i>Brivnshtelers</i> (Correspondence samplers), selections
10/18	NO CLASS: Succos		
10/20	Midterm (in-class exam)		
10/25	NO CLASS: Simchas Torah		
10/27	Collecting Yiddish folklore: folktales	Beatrice Weinreich	B. Weinreich, Yiddish Folktales*
11/1	Collecting Yiddish folklore: sayings	Matisoff	YIVO Ethnography; Kumove, Sayings*
11/3	Immigrant Yiddish culture: Popular song	Slobin	American Yiddish songs
11/8	Immigrant Yiddish culture: Press	Stein	<i>Bintl briv</i> (advice letters), selections
11/10	Screening: American Yiddish film		
11/15	American Yiddish theater & film	Hoberman	
11/17	Learning Yiddish in America	Shandler, chapter 2	Yiddish primer holiday stories
11/22	Yiddish in the USSR	Shneer	
11/24	NO CLASS: Thanksgiving		

11/29	Yiddish after the Holocaust	Kugelmass & Boyarin	<i>Yizker-bikher</i> (memorial books) selections
12/1	Postwar hasidic Yiddish	Fader	
12/6	Postvernacular Yiddish	Shandler, chapter 5	
12/8	Contemporary Yiddish culture: Guest presentation by Josh Friedman	TBA	TBA
12/13	Studying Yiddish after the war	Uriel Weinreich; AHEYM website	

## Secondary readings

AHEYM website: <http://www.iub.edu/~aheym/>

Bilik, Dorothy Seidman, "Tsene-rene: a Yiddish literary success," *Jewish Book Annual* 51 (1993): 96-111.

Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).\*

Harshav, Benjamin. *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).\*

Hoberman, J. *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* (New York: Schocken, 1991).\*

Katz, Dovid. *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (Basic Books, 2004).\*

Kugelmass, Jack, and Jonathan Boyarin, eds. *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (New York: Schocken, 1983).\*

Matisoff, James A. *Blessings, Curses, Hopes, and Fears: Psycho-Ostensive Expressions in Yiddish* (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1979), 1-8.

Nakhimovsky, Alica, and Roberta Newman. *Dear Mendl, Dear Reyzl: Yiddish Letter Manuals from Russia and America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), selection.

Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture During the Holocaust* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), ch. 1.

Parush, Iris. *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004).\*

Schwartz, Howard. "Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, Forerunner of Modern Jewish Literature," *Judaism* 31:2 (1982): 211-224.

Shandler, Jeffrey. *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).\*

Shneer, David. "Making Yiddish Modern: The Creation of a Yiddish-language Establishment in the Soviet Union," *East European Jewish Affairs* 30:2 (2000): 77-98.

Slobin, Mark. *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 119-163.

Stein, Sarah Abrevaya. *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).\*

Weinreich, Beatrice. *Yiddish Folktales* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).\*

Weinreich, Uriel. "Mapping a Culture," *Columbia University Forum* 6:3 (1963): 17-21.

Weissler, Chava. "Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic Women," in Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 159-181.