

Netta Avineri, PhD

navineri@gmail.com

2012 American Anthropological Association

**Yiddish Endangerment as Interactional Reality and Discursive Strategy:
Crossing into the Past and Crossing Out the Present**

(Counter)-Discourses about Yiddish Vitality and Endangerment

New York Times

"A Yiddish Revival, with New York Leading the Way" (Chan, October 17, 2007)

"Yiddish Resurfaces as City's 2nd Political Language" (Roberts, July 20, 2009)

"No Need to Kvetch, Yiddish Lives On in Catskills" (Berger, November 25, 2010)

"Reviving a Yiddish Group with Memories and Music" (Sullivan, December 4, 2010)

Jewish Daily Forward

"Youngish, Yiddish, and Staging a Revival" (Shapiro, July 3, 2009)

"The 'Revival' is Over, Let's Talk Continuity" (Kafrissen, June 25, 2010)

"The Mameloshn is Still a Mother Tongue" (Newman, June 25, 2010)

Other Online Publications

"Shvitz' and Other Things Yiddish Make a Comeback" (Nussbaum Cohen, July 18, 1997)

"Yiddish is Dead, Long Live Yiddish" (Spiro, September 16, 2009)

"Yiddish Theater: Keeping the Language Alive" (Fine, August 3, 2010)

"Yiddish is Alive and Well in the Hebrew City" (Paraszczuk, October 8, 2010)

"Yiddish Club Reignites Passion for *Mame-Loshn* at Yeshiva University" (February 25, 2011)

"The Pitslelech Are Reviving Yiddish" (by Devra Ferst)

Jewish Daily Forward - Published November 04, 2009

Oy *gevalt*, Yiddish is dying. It's listed in the Encyclopedia of The World's Endangered Languages, which means that an entire generation is at risk of not knowing such phrases as *nosh*, *shmear*, *pitsel* and *shayna maidel*. Indeed, where would we be as a people without some good bagels and *shmear*? Unless *bubbes*, *zaidies* and *alter kochers* (grumpy old men) keep teaching us Yiddish words, they might be lost to the *dreck* (garbage) forever.

Leave it to Grammy Award-winning art director and graphic designer Janet Perr to help bring Yiddish back into vogue, first with the quirky book "Yiddish for Dogs," and now with her new book, "Yiddish for Babies: A Language Primer for Your Little Pitsel." The picture book teaches 29 Yiddish words with entertaining pictures of babies in various states of "Yiddish": playing with a dreidel, letting out a *geshrei* (scream) and looking *ongepotchket* (gaudy) decked out with excessive amounts of jewelry.

The book's aim is to help babies understand their parents when they start yelling things like, "Stop kvetching, dinner will be ready soon," which the book reads next to a mother with a hot pot in her hand.

The book also teaches babies to look and act just like their *bubbe* in Boca. "Nu? Did you hear we're having a playdate later?" one baby says to another on an outdated flamingo-colored rotary phone. "Yay," the other baby responds, through a key-lime phone.

But the book is not just for babies. One of the last pages teaches parents the phrase *yiddisher kop* (smart person). So they can kvell: "Baby's on her way to Harvard. She's a real *yiddisher kop."

Responses to “The Pitselech Are Reviving Yiddish”

F.H. (Friday, November 6, 2009)

Gevald! This book and others like it would be the final nail in the coffin of Yiddish, if mameloshn weren't alive and kicking strongly enough to knock the stuffings out of such travesties!

a shande un a kharpe fun an amhoritste! feh!

S.Z. (Saturday, November 7, 2009)

Travesty, schmavetsy. If it's yiddish, it's OK by me! And I know I speak for the others in our yiddish club: Sura Leah, Rochel Chana, Dasha Riva, Golda, Shifra, Masha, Malka, and Leyaleh!

R.H. (Tuesday, November 17, 2009)

Is anyone else getting tired of Yiddish being presented as a funny little language, or rather jargon? Yiddish means a lot more than peppering one's English with (poorly spelled) Yiddish expressions for funny effect. It represents centuries of Ashkenazi culture and a rich literary tradition, not only comedy.

Y. (Tuesday, November 17, 2009)

Yiddish is not an endangered language. The haredi community maintains a distinct Jewish society, speaking its own language. It is not dying out. For the non-haredi Jews, Yiddish is no longer their language. It's finished, and all these newspaper headlines using the term "revival" are simply misleading and untrue. "Revival" means that people who did not speak Yiddish as a native language are now raising Yiddish-speaking children. That is not happening. One's real language is the language of one's society - not merely the language of one's parents. There is no Yiddish-speaking society. The American Jews are English-speakers, because they are part of the larger American society - not a distinct society like the (Yiddish-speaking) haredim or the (Hebrew-speaking) Israeli Jews. Yiddish is for American Jews a hobby (a Yiddish weekend, a Yiddish play, a Yiddish book of jokes) or an academic pursuit. A revival of Yiddish would mean a shift in identity. It would mean the end of an American identity and the re-adoption of another identity. It would mean the undoing of a century of assimilation. Since Jewish identity is of secondary importance to most American Jews, Yiddish will remain merely a hobby (and in the next generation, there will be some other hobby).

I. (Friday, November 20, 2009)

A revival of Yiddish would mean a shift in identity. It would mean the end of an American identity and the re-adoption of another identity. It would mean the undoing of a century of assimilation." Y., I must take exception to your cut-and-dried concepts of identity and assimilation. Actually, a revival of Yiddish would represent a great benefit to the American Jewish identity, because that is in fact where most of us come from. America is a pluralistic society. In my family we are observant, but by no means haredim. I, my wife and three young children speak Yiddish every day. Not just a few cutesy expressions, but real, fluent Yiddish. About 90% of our communication with the children is in Yiddish. It is neither a hobby nor an academic pursuit, it's our family language. My wife and I are American born, we speak English well (in fact we both have advanced degrees in English literature), but the twins learned their English in school. In no way does this mean the end of an American identity, but for us it is a more interesting and integral identity. When you say "It would mean the undoing of a century of assimilation," I find this a fairly meaningless abstraction. Both my grandfathers came to the US approximately a century ago. I knew both of them (my grandmothers both died young), as well as many other relatives of their generation. I also knew my parents and those of their generation -- I had lots of aunts, uncles and cousins. Both the assimilation or resistance to assimilation are quite palpable in our experience, not some vague force totally beyond our control. Nor do I regard assimilation as totally negative, we are American and that means a great deal to us. Lets better call it acculturation. So Jewish identity can evolve and still have continuity, because our family histories are at the core of of our Jewish identities. Admittedly all this takes some effort, and I don't claim it's a mass movement, but we are by no means alone in the USA (or Europe, or Australia) in raising our children in Yiddish.