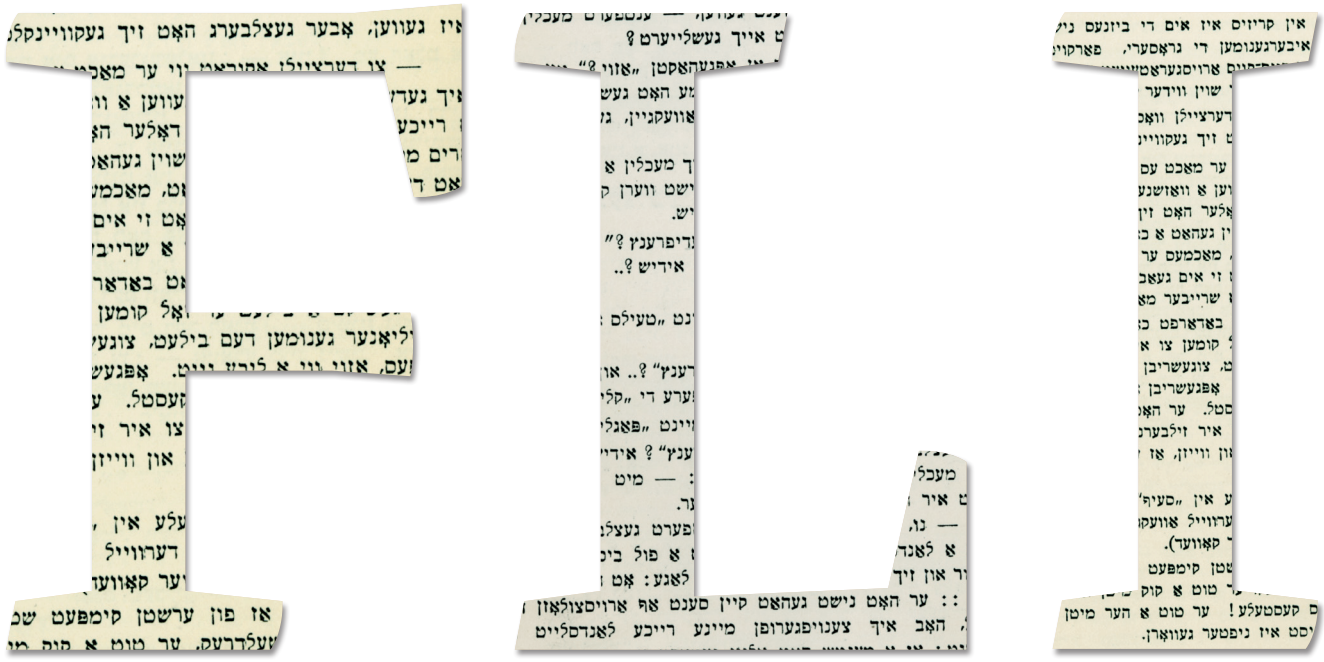
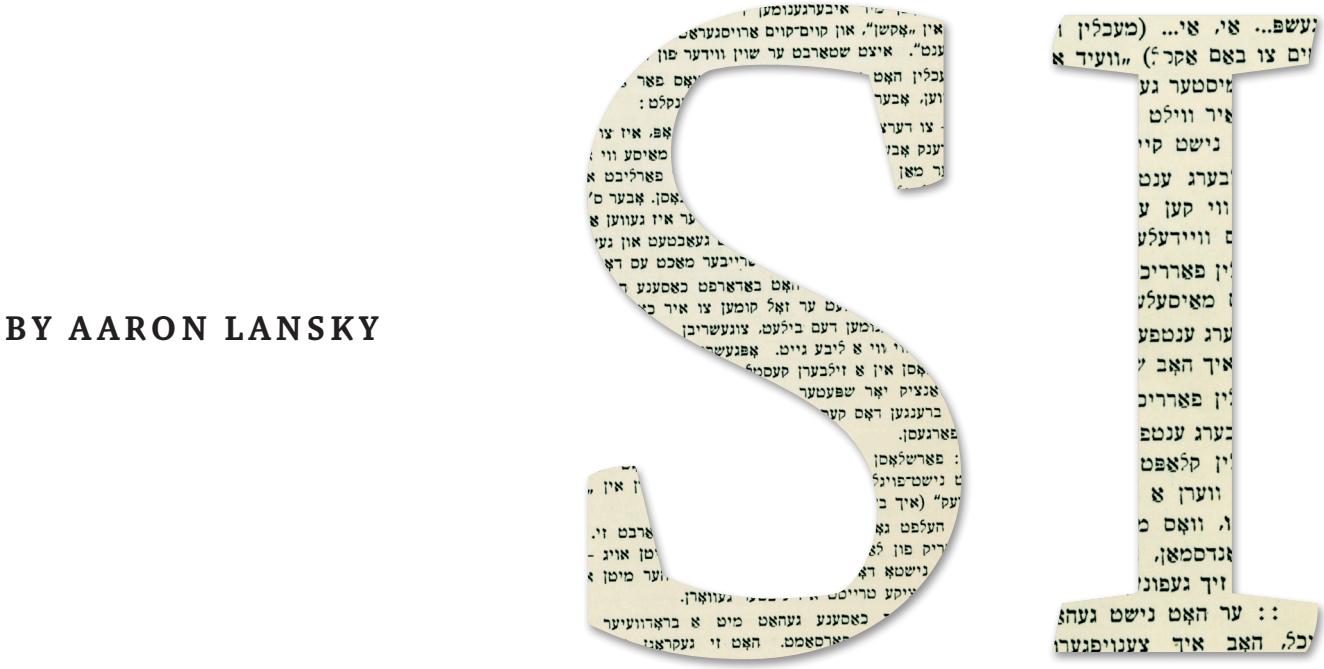


The Yiddish Book Center's



BY AARON LANSKY

In his novel *Enemies: A Love Story,* Isaac Bashevis Singer describes the elderly owner of a Yiddish bookshop who at the end of the day secures his establishment with a heavy padlock. He does so, he explains to a neighbor, not because he's afraid of thieves stealing his inventory: "My only fear is that some Yiddish author might break in at night and put in some more books."

Next Great Adventure

Thirty-one years ago, when we set out to save the world's Yiddish books, scholars estimated that 70,000 were still extant and recoverable. We've gone on to save more than a million volumes. For years we bounced along in rattletrap trucks, pulled priceless books from demolition sites and Dumpsters, and listened as older Jews plied us with *kugl, kikhlekh,* and *glezelekh tey* (noodle pudding, pastries, and glasses of hot tea) and regaled us with stories of their eventful lives.

But for all that, as Singer's bookseller knew all too well, saving a literature was the easy part. The books we collected constitute a treasure of the entire Jewish people, and as the Yiddish Book Center begins its fourth decade our challenge is to figure out how to safeguard them, distribute them, translate them, and above all to share their content with new generations.

Yiddish Book Center

The significance of the books we've recovered cannot be overstated. For a thousand years roughly three-quarters of all Jews spoke Yiddish as their first or only language. In the second half of the 19th century, as enlightenment made its way into Eastern Europe, Yiddish gave rise to the single most concentrated outpouring of literary and artistic creativity in Jewish history. Twenty-five thousand titles appeared, including novels, plays, short stories, poetry, essays, memoirs, and scholarship. There was a renaissance of Jewish music, theater, visual arts, film, and more. All this boundless and often contentious inventiveness shared the same underlying theme: how best to live as Jews in a modern world.

It is difficult today to grasp how much Yiddish literature and culture once meant to East European Jews and their descendants. Uprooted from ancestral homes, cut off from a way of life that had prevailed for centuries, they turned to Yiddish books for comfort and guidance in a fast-changing world. Rare was the Ashkenazic Jewish home without collections of I. L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Asch, and other popular Yiddish writers. We've found Yiddish books in every state, in every Canadian province, in Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Australia, England, France, and, of course, Russia and Eastern Europe. Time and time again elderly Jews handed us their libraries with the words *"Ot iz mayn yerushe*—Here is my inheritance." In their eyes, they possessed no greater treasure.

How then did it happen that subsequent generations so readily relinquished and in some cases literally discarded their parents' and grandparents' libraries? After all, Jews are arguably one of the most bookish people on the planet. We call ourselves *"Am hasefer*—the People of the Book," and we think of our literature as a "portable homeland," the repository of collective memory. When religious books, written in Hebrew or Aramaic, are no longer usable, they're given a proper funeral. Why then did we so unceremoniously abandon modern, secular books written in Yiddish?

For most Jews, the obvious explanation is that they couldn't read them. As Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy observed in 1969, "Talk Yiddish? *How?* I've got twenty-five words to my name—half of them dirty, and the rest mispronounced."

Which, given the course of American Jewish history, is not entirely surprising. The 2.5 million East European Jews who arrived in the United States between 1881 and 1924 strove at first to recreate the dense, all-encompassing Jewish life they had known in Europe. Immigrant neighborhoods teemed with shuls and *shtiblekh* (Hasidic prayer houses), cafés and cafeterias, Yiddish newspapers, schools, and theaters. A powerful labor movement and vibrant political and fraternal organizations fanned fervid public debate.

But there were also strong countervailing currents. The American Constitution protected religious freedom, but otherwise the country saw itself as a melting pot. Jews responded by taking what had been a complex, holistic, multifaceted civilization and recasting it in a manner more consistent

with the Christian mainstream: as a religious denomination divorced from culture. Apart from religion, almost everything else that made Jews different—languages, literature, music, art, film, food, humor, and sensibility—was toned down, swept under the rug, hidden from the kids, trivialized, or forgotten.

Of course Jews were no different from other immigrants: a hundred years ago, who didn't want to learn English, play baseball, attend public schools, and make it in America? But other ethnic groups still had homelands back in Europe to keep their languages and cultures alive. For Jews it was different. They came here fleeing pogroms and persecution. There were 11 million Yiddish speakers in the world when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939; by 1945 one in two had been murdered, and the great Jewish cultural centers of Eastern Europe lay in ruins. In the Soviet Union, purges and persecution culminated on August 12, 1952, when Stalin ordered the execution on a single night of his country's leading Yiddish writers. Jews in America were on their own—they weren't going back.

After the war, Israel came increasingly to shape Jewish culture. The country provided a safe home for Jewish refugees, revived an ancient language, and made the desert bloom. But in its eagerness to create a "new type of Jew," Zionism predicated itself on "negation of the *galut*," erasure of the diaspora past. Yiddish and its culture were actively suppressed.

Today, thanks in no small measure to the vibrancy of Israeli culture and the success of Jews in America, we are witnessing what can only be described as a Jewish renaissance. But curiously, it's a rebirth informed by only limited knowledge of the civilization that came before. With few exceptions, the curriculum of Hebrew schools and day schools—the Jewish knowledge we choose to teach our children—is limited to four main areas: Hebrew language, religion, modern Israel, and the Holocaust. Our children learn a great deal about Judaism but surprisingly little about Jews. They study Hebrew, but don't hear a word of Yiddish, the language most Jews actually spoke for the past thousand years. They learn a version of Jewish history that begins with the Bible, continues through the destruction of the Second Temple, and then *whoosh*—skips 1,800 years, until Theodor Herzl steps into the scene and we're all back in Israel. Students learn to pray in Hebrew, and sometimes they study ancient and medieval texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, but only rarely, if at all, do they encounter any of the tens of thousands of titles of *modern* Jewish literature, in Yiddish, English, Hebrew, and other languages, that would speak most directly to their own concerns and experience. Four of our best modern Jewish writers—Shai Agnon in Hebrew, Nellie Sachs in German, Isaac Bashevis Singer in Yiddish, and Saul Bellow in English—won the Nobel Prize in Literature, yet not one is routinely taught in Jewish schools.

Five years ago, after the publication of my book *Outwitting History,* I embarked on a yearlong promotional tour that took me to more than 60 cities. In almost every one, large audiences turned out, eager, I think, to hear about an aspect of Jewish identity that had loomed large in their childhoods but had since seemed to vanish into thin air. I was struck in particular by day school principals and teachers who, on more than one occasion, pulled me aside and asked almost surreptitiously how they could introduce Yiddish language instruction and expand the scope of what they taught.

"I don't know how it happened," confided the principal of a well-regarded Jewish high school in California, "but somehow we've turned into a parochial school. Our school day is divided into two halves: Jewish and Secular. Since when is the Jewish world only religious, and the non-Jewish world only secular? What about the secular side of Jewish culture?" He sighed. "I'm the principal, I want to make changes. So do many of my best teachers. But we don't have the training. Where do we begin?"

The notion of a more integrated and inclusive Jewish curriculum is hardly without precedent. Although great ideological battles once raged between "Hebraists" and "Yiddishists," the reality was probably always more inclusive. I still remember how my Galician-born grandfather, a religious Jew

Everything that made Jews different was toned down, swept under the rug, hidden from the kids, trivialized, or forgotten.

who made his living as a junkman, used to come home from work each day, put on a yarmulke, and sit down to read the *Forverts,* a socialist Yiddish paper.

My grandfather's action was not a contradiction but an affirmation of Jewish tradition. Historically, the religious and the "secular" have both been integral components of Jewish identity. Every Saturday night, in the Havdalah prayer that separates Shabbos, the Sabbath, from the rest of the week, Jews affirm a distinction between *kodesh* and *khol,* the holy and the everyday. It's not that one is Jewish and the other is not, any more than Hebrew is Jewish and Yiddish is not. Rather, there's a dialectical tension between the two, a juxtaposition that's long served as a motive force of Jewish evolution. The *kodesh,* the religious, elevates quotidian existence, and the *khol* brings lofty teachings down to earth, translating them into daily idiom, deflating pretension, forestalling fundamentalism, and keeping Jewishness from growing stagnant or stale. It takes both sides of the equation—Hebrew and Yiddish, religion and culture, *kodesh* and *khol*—to make Jewishness resilient, adaptable, dynamic, and complete.

It takes Hebrew and Yiddish, religion and culture, *kodesh* and *khol* to make Jewishness resilient, adaptable, dynamic, and complete.

But in recent years, especially in America, that dialectical totality has become elusive. Although the *kodesh* side of Jewish life—Hebrew, religion, spirituality, Hasidism, even Kabbalah—is thriving, the flip side—Yiddish, modern Jewish literature, history, ethnography, theater, music, dance, and the rest of the swirling constellation of Jewish culture—too often goes untaught, overshadowed or overlooked. To put it more succinctly, the *kodesh* we've got already; now we need the *khol* to make us whole.

This is not the time for *al khet,* for recrimination and regret over errors and omissions of the past. Considering the dislocations and depredations of the past century, it's no wonder we lost our grip on some of our most valuable linguistic, literary, and cultural treasures. What matters now is not what we might have lost, but what's still there for the finding.

In that sense, there's more cause for optimism than at any time since the Yiddish Book Center began. When I was 24 years old—a naïve graduate student in a borrowed suit—I went to every major Jewish organization in New York to ask for help in saving Yiddish books. They all turned me away empty-handed. "Yiddish is dead," they asserted. "Even if you can save Yiddish books, who will ever read them?" At the time, the best I could manage was to point to the intrinsic value of Yiddish literature. The Jewish leaders remained unconvinced. I returned to Massachusetts, scrounged money from friends, bluffed my way into a deferred-payment lease on an empty factory loft, rallied grassroots support, and, with the help of hundreds of volunteers, we went on to save Yiddish literature on our own.

It's only now, 30 years later, that I finally have a definitive answer to their challenge. Twelve years ago, with help from Steven Spielberg and others, we digitized most of the books in our collection, prompting the *New York Times* to declare Yiddish "proportionately the most in-print literature on the planet." Two years ago we went a giant step further: posting the full text of 11,000 Yiddish titles online, available completely free of charge. According to the Internet Archive, the nonprofit group that hosts our online library, in the first 24 months full-length Yiddish books have been downloaded 217,000 times!

Part of this extraordinary demand is attributable to changes in the academy. Following broader historiographical trends, the academic field has shifted over the past three decades from *Judaic* Studies, the study of Judaism, to *Jewish* Studies, the more inclusive study of Jews. How can one fully understand a people without understanding their primary language? It would be no more defensible for a contemporary Jewish scholar not to know Yiddish than it would be, say, for a foreign scholar of American Studies not to know English.

But only in very recent years has that recognition begun to percolate into the broader Jewish community. Times are changing fast—faster than most of us might imagine. If our parents, the children of immigrants, were the *"sha shtil"* generation, reticent about embracing the flip side of Jewish identity lest they appear "too Jewish," many

young people today have the opposite inclination. They've come of age in a multicultural world that's learned to celebrate its diversity, a world of many colors, distinct voices, pulsating rhythms, eye-opening books, and exotic cuisine. As young Jews look to their own identity, they're naturally asking cultural and historical questions: who are we, where do we come from, what language did we speak, what jobs did we hold, what foods did we eat, what books did we read, what songs did we sing? For 2,000 years Jews have lived on the outside. We're the archetypical minority, the original counterculture. Now, when "out" is "in," when at last we have the chance to take our own seat at the table, is this really the time to forget our history, forsake our languages, discard our books, forgo our foods, and serve up white bread instead?

Not long ago the Yiddish Book Center's board of directors met in the conference room of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. Through a wall of windows we looked out on the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, the same sights our grandparents saw when they sailed into New York Harbor a hundred years before. Our grandparents gradually resigned themselves to the fact that their American-born children wouldn't speak their language or understand their lives. Not in their wildest dreams could they have imagined that a century later their grandchildren would be sitting in a magnificent Jewish museum at the edge of this same harbor, discussing ways to reclaim the language and culture they'd been compelled to leave behind.

No one at that meeting suggested we turn back the clock. Jews in America have attained unimaginable success: at barely 2 percent of the population, we're 33 percent of Supreme Court justices, 37 percent of Nobel Laureates, and 60 percent of Ivy League presidents. But that's exactly the point: after three generations on American shores, we're secure enough in our Americanism to safely reclaim our grandparents' treasures. There's simply no reason anymore not to tell the whole Jewish story, to lay claim to all of our identity, to replenish literary and cultural knowledge and reignite the dialectic that made us who we are.

In fact, in today's world a more complete understanding of Jewish culture is not only possible, it's imperative. Throughout our long history we've learned to borrow from our non-Jewish neighbors and fuse outside elements into our own frame of reference. Much of what we now think of as quintessentially Jewish—Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and other Jewish languages, the *afikomen* we eat at the Passover seder, Hasidic clothing, Jewish music and ideas—all bear witness to this creative process. But the process only works if our core culture burns hot enough to allow us to borrow without being subsumed. This is no time to forfeit the flip side of our identity, to lose languages, literatures, history, or books. If the modern world has upped the amplitude and pace of interaction, it's also given us unprecedented access to Jewish knowledge. As long as our learning and identity remain whole, we can continue to borrow, change, absorb new energy, forge new syntheses, and spark creativity such as the Jewish people has never known before.

The good news is that the work has already begun. The days are long gone when *"yeder makht shabes far zikh*—everyone makes Shabbos for themselves." Wherever we look we see artists and activists, foundations and organizations working to broaden and enliven Jewish life. Jewishness is a big tent that's getting bigger all the time.

In that context, the Yiddish Book Center has a unique role to play. The million books on our shelves represent a great reservoir of Jewish culture, and our experience in preserving them has yielded insights about their meaning. We'd be remiss if we failed to do everything in our power to share their powerful content, their historical context, and their literary and cultural progeny with new generations. As I write, we're setting new goals and planning ambitious new projects. I'm looking forward to sharing our vision and plans in the second half of this article, scheduled for publication in the next issue of *Pakn Treger*. For now, 30 years after we first set out to save the world's Yiddish books, I can safely say that even more exciting adventures lie ahead.