

A woman and a language: In the case of a Yiddish speaker in Israel

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In this essay, I would like to describe a relationship between Yiddish and a woman in Israel. This is a story about one of the Jewish languages in the Jewish nation. This example is not enough to provide us with a general theory, however, it might offer us some insights for our research.

Yiddish and Israel

The official languages of the state of Israel are Modern Hebrew and Arabic. English is the number one among commonly used foreign language, and Russian is also heard on the street because of the existence of a large number of Russian-speaking immigrants. Yiddish is, on the other hand, neither an official language nor spoken on the street in Israel though it was widely spoken among Jewish people a couple of generations ago in Eastern Europe and many of them live and lived in Israel. The difficult condition of Yiddish in the language policy in Israel is shown in Fishman & Fishman (1978) and Spolsky & Shohamy (1999)¹. It has also been briefly summarized, with an additional description of the recent situation, in Shandler (2005)². At present, Yiddish is treated as a “minority” language or a “dead” language. However, there are people who still speak Yiddish at home and people who start to learn, read and speak it at some institutions and gatherings. For example, there are regular courses in the Yiddish language at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Yiddish Summer Programs at Tel Aviv University and Bar-Ilan University. Also people gather at private houses once a week or month. They read Yiddish literature together and try to exchange their impressions only in Yiddish. In addition, there is a Yiddish club in Jerusalem called *Yidishe³ Kultur-Gezelschaft* (Yiddish Culture Society), run by about 30 to 40⁴ elderly people whose mother tongue is Yiddish or who know

1 pp. 1-29, pp. 207-27

2 pp. 9-11

3 In this essay, Hebrew characters for Yiddish are transliterated into the Latin alphabet in the YIVO style. Yiddish words are printed in italics in the main text.

4 The number of participants changes depending on the activities and the weather conditions. More people come for concerts and films than for lectures. And in bad weather and during the winter it is not easy for them to attend the meeting.

Yiddish well. They gather once a week to listen to lectures in Yiddish about Yiddish⁵, to watch videos about Yiddish and to enjoy concerts of Yiddish music⁶. During breaks they enjoy chatting in Yiddish, Hebrew and other languages. There are some gatherings and courses at some institutions in Tel Aviv too. For example: *Beth Shalom Aleichem* (Shalom Aleichem House), *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen's Circle) and *Beth Leyvik* (Leyvik House).

A woman and Yiddish

While I was attending some Yiddish gatherings, I got to know a woman who came to the *Yidishe Kultur-Gezelschaft* and a reading club. The woman, about 80 years old, speaks Yiddish as her second language. One a year after our first meeting, I did an interview with her in Yiddish about her attitude to Yiddish⁷.

Yiddish and the woman from the United States

She was born in New York. When she was a child her family moved to Massachusetts. Her parents sent her to Yiddish school when she was five or six years old. Then they came back to New York, where she attended a Yiddish school. She studied at a local high school and in the evening studied at a Yiddish teacher's seminar. At university she majored in French and finished her bachelor's degree in 1945. She continued studying at the Yiddish teacher's seminar with some well known scholars of Yiddish and graduated in 1948. After that she married her late husband and had children. After she finished the Yiddish teacher's seminar, she worked as a Yiddish teacher continuously at a Yiddish afternoon school until 1970.

She speaks English as her mother tongue, and speaks Yiddish very well. She is saying Yiddish is "almost" her mother tongue. She learned French and Spanish in her university days but does not speak these languages, she says. She explains,

5 Topics of the lectures are mostly about Yiddish literature and poetry.

6 The singers mainly sing in Yiddish but during pauses between songs they are talking in Russian or Hebrew. And they also sing some songs in Russian and Hebrew.

7 This interview was conducted in Jerusalem in 2007, for 30 minutes; less than 4,000 words in transcription. This interview is part of the interviews for preparations for my doctoral dissertation "Yiddish in Israel as a living language between 1948 to 2008" in which I am investigating the reason why some people in Israel are interested in Yiddish now. I am conducting interviews with people who are attending Yiddish gatherings and classes in Israel.

“I was born in New York, so probably I spoke English at home but I am sure that my parents talked with me in Yiddish because they came from Poland⁸.”

She thinks it is natural that she spoke English at home because she was born in New York, and that her parents spoke to her not in Polish or Russian but in Yiddish since they came from Poland. Since her father sent her to some Yiddish schools and she liked them, she spoke and learned Yiddish all the time in the United States.

Her marriage was also connected with Yiddish. Her late husband was also a Yiddish speaker who escaped from Poland, passed through Japan and China and immigrated to the United States after the Second World War. When they met for the first time, he did not speak English well. Her husband knew that she was a Yiddish instructor when he met her for the first time. Therefore he spoke to her in Yiddish. In the beginning, they did not have any common language except Yiddish. Not only between them, but also between her father and her husband Yiddish was spoken. She recalls an episode between him and her father.

“We [she and her husband] spoke in Yiddish. And ... and he spoke with my father in Yiddish. And he all the time said to my father *ir* [formal form of 2nd person singular in Yiddish]. [...]”⁹ until we decided to get married¹⁰.”

Yiddish was the common language between her, him and her parents. After her marriage, in 1950, she wrote a letter in Yiddish to her grandparents who were in Tel Aviv. The letter was in Yiddish because, again, it was the only common language between her, who knew English and Yiddish but was not sufficiently proficient in Polish and Hebrew, and her grandparents who knew Hebrew, Polish and Yiddish but hardly any English.

Yiddish and the woman in Israel

In 1974, she moved to Israel with her husband, bringing her parents and daughters together. Her father was already 83 years old at that time. After her son finished his doctoral degree in New York, he also came to Israel. They wanted to come to Israel because their family lived there. She says,

8 *ikh bin geboyren in nyu-york, iz minastam bob ikh geredt english in der heym, ober ikh bin zikher az mayne eltern hobn mit mir geredt yidish, vayl zey zaynen gekumen fun poln.*

9 The sign ‘[...]’ in the text stands for text omitted by the author.

10 *mir hobn geredt yidish. un ... un er hot geredt mit mayn tatn oyf yidish. un er hot ale mol gezogt tsu mayn tatn ir. [...]* *biz mir hobn bashlosn khasene tsu hobn.*

“...¹¹ because we wanted to come. My ... my husband wanted to [come]¹² all the time. He lost his whole family. And the only [family] he had ... uncle and cousins here in Israel. And my father had family in Israel. And ... and we wanted to come. And my son wanted to come to Israel also¹³.”

However, though Israel was the place where she really wanted to go, she could not feel free to speak Yiddish. She speaks Hebrew on the street and English with her family. Her grandchildren speak much better Hebrew than Yiddish. She recalls that when they moved to Israel, the people in Israel were opposed to speaking Yiddish. They had to speak Hebrew instead of Yiddish which was one of the Jewish languages. Not only she but also other people who spoke Yiddish or other languages, had to get used to speak Hebrew which is one of the national languages of the state of Israel. Such an atmosphere against Yiddish in Israel could be one of the possible causes for the decrease in the number of Yiddish speakers. At present, as already mentioned, it is rarely spoken in Israel. Even on the main street in Meah Shearim, the neighbourhoods in Jerusalem populated mainly by pious Jews, Modern Hebrew is much more popular than Yiddish. As to my question, how she thinks about the situation, she answers with resignation “I cannot change the situation¹⁴.” About the attitude of people in Israel towards Yiddish, she comments as follows:

“When the State of Israel became the Jewish State, they (people in Israel) wanted that a single language should be [there]. They did not let someone speak Yiddish. So, [they wanted that] Yiddish should not be an official language. And people do not let the Jews who came, [they were] a lot..., who came after the [Second World] War, after the *Shoah* (the Holocaust in Hebrew), they came ... and they did not let them speak Yiddish¹⁵”

As she mentions, Yiddish has not been spoken in public places. And the population of the people who speak Yiddish as their mother tongue or second language seems to be decreasing. She says, “There are a lot of people who speak Yiddish, but no longer, because on the street, [the other] people speak He-

11 “...” is interruption in her speech.

12 Text inside brackets is supplementary writing by the author.

13 ... *vayl mir hobn gevolt kumen. mayn ... mayn man hot ale mol gevolt. er hot farlorn zayn gantsn mishpoke. un di eyntsike hot er gebat ... feters un shvesterkinder do in yisroel un mayn tate hot gebat mishpoke do in yisroel. un ... mir hobn gevolt kumen. un mayn zun hot gevolt kumen keyn yisroel.*

14 *ikh ken nisht endern di situatsye.*

15 *ven medines-yisroel iz gevorn di yidishe medine, hobn zey gevolt az eyn shprakh zol zayn. hobn zey nisht geloxt az men zol redn yidish, az yidish zol nisht zayn an ofitsyele shprakh, un men hot nisht geloxt di yidn vos zaynen gekumen, a sakb ... vos zaynen gekumen, nokh der milkhome, nokh di shoah (the Holocaust), zaynen gekumen ...un me hot zey nisht geloxt redn yidish.*

brew¹⁶” She recognizes that Yiddish has been destroyed in Israel and thinks that though there are people who can speak Yiddish, they do not have a chance to use it. Thus she is not satisfied with the condition of Yiddish in Israel from the past to the present. However, in spite of the attitude of the State of Israel towards Yiddish, she has been enjoying living in Israel. Israel is the place where she and her family had always wanted to go, and where they live now.

After she came to Israel, she also taught Yiddish to children for 4-5 years and women for 2 years at her house. Now she lives in a retirement home in Jerusalem. She attends both the *Yidishe Kultur-Gezelschaft* and a reading club as often as she can. Sometimes she goes to attend Yiddish theater in Jerusalem. At these gatherings, she speaks in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English with other people¹⁷. In the retirement home, there are some Yiddish speakers, but not many. She reads in Yiddish¹⁸, loves singing Yiddish songs, and sings them with her grandchildren sometimes. She has friends with whom she can speak in Yiddish. She likes to write e-mails in Yiddish to friends in the United States. Most of them worked or are working for the case of Yiddish, for example as scholars, actors, singers, or teachers of Yiddish, but also within their families. She says that she writes to them in Yiddish. So, we can know that Yiddish is a somewhat common language between them, though they usually listen to and read more English than Yiddish on the street both in the United States and Israel. Their friendship is based on Yiddish and they are connected with Yiddish. About the use of Yiddish in her family, she says,

“I speak with them mostly in English because they came from New York. However, I can speak with them in Yiddish all the time. My son speaks Yiddish well. [...] He can translate from ... from English to Yiddish, from Hebrew to Yiddish. My children, they can all the time speak in Yiddish also. And with my grandchildren, with my daughter’s four girls (her grand children), I taught a little bit. They sing also in Yiddish¹⁹.”

16 *es zaynen do a sakhl mentshen vos redn yidish, ober mer tsi nisht vayl in der gas redt men hebreish.*

17 Between people who can speak Yiddish, Hebrew and English, they sometimes talk in Yiddish and sometimes talk in Hebrew or English. It seems that they change the language depending on topics and on who is present.

18 According to her, the books which she reads alone are mostly in English. It could be because she can read English more quickly and easily compared to Yiddish, and also because English books offer more diversity.

19 *ikh red mit zey tsum merstens english, vayl zey zaynen fun nyu-york. ober ikh ken redn mit zey yidish ale mol. mayn zun redt gut yidish. [...] er ken iberzetsn fun ... fun english oyf yidish, fun hebreish oyf yidish. mayne kinder, zey kenen ale mol redn oykh yidish. un mit di eyniklekh, hob ikh mit mayn tochter fir meydelekh, hob ikh gelernt a bisele. zey zingen oykh yidish.*

With her children who know Yiddish, she “can always talk to them in Yiddish also,” however, they “mostly” speak in English because they “came from New York.” Many times she proudly told me episodes about her grandchildren who sing in Yiddish. And she wanted one of her grandchildren to attend a Yiddish summer program. It seems that she wants them to be connected with Yiddish. She does know and speaks Hebrew. However, as she considers, “I know Hebrew but not so good as much as I know [...] Yiddish and English²⁰,” Though Hebrew is the local language for Jewish people in Israel, English and Yiddish are more familiar for her. Hebrew is a language which she came to speak after she started to live in Israel and had not been a language at her home.

Conclusion and discussion

Without a doubt, Yiddish is very important for her because it is the language which her parents brought from Poland to the United States, and she and her husband brought it from the United States to Israel. As mentioned above, as a result of their move and the variations of the languages in her family, Yiddish has been the only common language through generations from her grandparents to her grandchildren. The language connects her from place to place and from generation to generation. Moreover it connects her with friends from her school days even now. Although both she and her friends speak English as a mother tongue or almost as a mother tongue, she communicates with them in Yiddish. It shows how much they are connected with each other through Yiddish. In Jerusalem, she is attending Yiddish gatherings to speak it, meet friends, and out of intellectual curiosity.

She has not lived in places where Yiddish is spoken widely on the street, however, without Yiddish, she cannot tell about her life because she has used Yiddish with her family and friends, the people who are always around her. Answering my question, “Do you mean, you need Yiddish?” she says, “I need it, yes, because I ... I spoke Yiddish all the time and learned all the time and it is also, it is almost like my mother tongue²¹.” In this way, she has been always with Yiddish. She says, “I love Yiddish and it is a part of ... of our life ... of today and the past and all the time [...]”²² Through these details, we can see that Yiddish has followed her all through her life and it is impossible to tell her history

20 *un ikh ken 'evrit (Hebrew)', ober nisht azoy gut vi ikh ken [...] yidish un english.*

21 *ikh darf es yo, vayl ikh ... ikh hob ale mol geredt yidish un ale mol gelernt, un dos iz oykh, dos iz kimat vi mayn mame-loshn.*

22 *ikh hob a libshaft tsu yidish, un dos iz a teyl fun ... fun undzer lebn ... fun haynt un fun amol, un fun ale yorn [...]*

without Yiddish. Yiddish is continuous in her life and connects her with family and friends both practically and symbolically.

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