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Final Term Paper

Yiddish in America

Yiddish Among the Modern Hasidim

Yiddish, although both spoken less, and less of a cultural symbol in modern times for the Jewish people than in the past, is flourishing among the niche community of the Hasidim, where it is taught, spoken, used in schools, and learned by people joining their community. To begin, Yiddish (as it is not spoken by most non-Hasidic-Jews) exists as one of the many-faceted "*gedorim*," or gates, between the Hasids and the Gentile world, as it separates them from their peers who are less or not at all observant (Fader 1). Furthering this point, Yiddish also plays a massive role in the identity (both social and religious) of this sub-community of Jewish people, and this is best summarized by the claim, "Hasidic Jews have long used language to mark difference and identification, intra-communally and inter-communally" (Fishman 81). Moving from the role Yiddish has today to how it acquired that role, one confronts many theories as to why the Hasidim continue to speak it, and most notably the social motivations that spurred on Yiddish in post-World War II America still form the foundation of the Hasidim's relationship to Yiddish today, both as a barrier and as a cultural icon of nostalgia.

The Relationship of the Hasidim to Yiddish Today: Explored

In Modern Hasidic communities, men study Hebrew, or *loshn koydesh*, to read the Torah and analyze it by discussing it in Yiddish. Women, however, are, "ideally fluent and literate in both the Jewish vernacular, Yiddish, and the co-territorial language, English." (Fader 2). However, when looking at the Yiddish of the modern Hasidic communities today, a third linguistic variant exists. The Yiddish spoken in communities in Borough Park, Brooklyn (New York) today is as idiosyncratic as the English spoken by the same community, leading to some researchers, notably Fader, to refer to the two tongues (when being spoken by the population in question) as, "Hasidic Yiddish[1]," and, "Jewish English." This is because both draw on linguistic characteristics such as code switching, where one who is bilingual and in the present of a parallel bilingual person, will switch between the two languages throughout a conversation or even sentence (Fader 2). (Jewish English, as distinct from Yiddish, will not be explored in any greater detail, but note that when one refers to the Hasidic people speaking among themselves in English, it is frequently in this register.)

The modern Hasidic population living in New York today speaks not the Yiddish of the Yiddish theater or their Eastern European ancestors, but a syncretic

[1] The "Hasidic Yiddish spoken today is distinct from the "Yishivish," or Orthodox Jewish communities which is only English with loanwords and other influences from both Hebrew and Yiddish (Gold 289).

Yiddish unique for its' sprinkle of English and for certain grammatical and colloquial modifications. This syncretism is essentially a marker denoting that the modern Yiddish spoken and currently in question is not so distinct from formalized (a tricky modifier, in this case) Yiddish that it is a dialect, but is unique enough that it is noted as a register. Anyone speaking it would be able to communicate with a formally educated non-native competent Yiddish speaker, but if that same person listened to their speech, a multitude of idiosyncrasies would be noted. "Scholarship on linguistic syncretism has shown that simultaneities can be a way to bridge or maintain an ongoing tension between two, often opposed identities, to lay claim to a fluid cosmopolitan identity (Spitulnik 96), or even to claim a new ethic identity based on the revalorization of syncretic linguistic varieties and new spaces for expression" (Fader 2).

"Hasidic Yiddish" is arguably less pure or formalized than the Yiddish spoken in the same locale in the years past. However, this linguistic marker is actually a clue to an underlying value in this society, which is that the outlook or intention of the speaker (or writer) is explicitly more important than the language in which it was written. (Fader 6) (Looking to the purported link between Yiddish and upholding a social identity rooted in a religious one, one should note that this value referenced above is arguably religious in nature, given its' prevalence throughout Hasidic teachings both historically and in modernity.) As to why Hasidic Yiddish remains distinct from formalized Yiddish, one must recognize that the Hasidic community has little interest in standardization because they, (based on their social identity, with this belief specifically

originating from their respective *rebbes*) "do not acknowledge the long tradition of secular Yiddish literature nor Jewish secular efforts to standardize Yiddish" (Weinreich, U.).

While defining Hasidic Yiddish, one must note certain characteristics that demonstrate its inherent link to establishment of a distinct social identity. In her field work, Fader found that the editor of the Yiddish family magazine, *"Maylos,"* argued that the reason so many Hasidic community authority figures encourage the Hasidim to use Yiddish pronunciation and phonology when utilizing English loan words is that the goal of speaking Yiddish today is, "for Yiddish to sound (and look) different from Gentiles' language, to be *far-yidisht* ('Yiddishized')" (Fader 7). Despite the above explained obvious existence of Hasidic English, there has been some pushback, not so much in terms of linguistic purism, but rather as a preservation means, to use Yiddish even more exclusively in the classroom. This practice of Yiddishizing English words, which the editor of *Maylos* noted was encouraged, is one means of doing just that. The motivation for this most likely stems from the inevitable fact that there are fewer and fewer Yiddish speakers as time goes on.

Part of the reasoning for the acceptance of Hasidic English is articulated by this same editor of *Maylos*, where he claims, "Where Jews have been in the diaspora, they have fashioned their own languages, borrowing freely from the language around them" (Fader 8). What is distinct about the English incorporated into Hasidic Yiddish is that

people are, in fact, following the strictures of community leaders, and tending towards Yiddish phonology. This is the key differentiation in drawing the line between what additions of English are deemed acceptable and which are deemed not, the latter being synchronous with secularizing here. The rationale for this acceptance of Yiddish-sounding English can obviously be linked to the oft-repeated cry of obtaining/maintaining a social identity, which is once again articulated by this same editor in his plaint, "If English words with English phonology continued to enter Yiddish, then Jews would begin to forget Yiddish and ultimately stop speaking it. However, when English is modified by Yiddish phonology the essential difference between Jews and Gentiles would not be threatened."

By looking at how Yiddish socially manifests itself in this community, trends and examples supporting the purported scholarship above become obvious. The syncretism in Yiddish exists with English (mostly among women, a trend to be discussed in great detail further on), and the most obvious tension among this insular community is that between their inner community (Yiddish-speaking) and the encroaching secular world (English-speaking). As for a, "cosmopolitan identity," it comes as no surprise that this modern syncretic Yiddish exists in one of the largest, most bustling, and arguably, cosmopolitan, cities in the world. Finally, as is explored in Benor's book, "Becoming Frum," it is by learning Yiddish that those wishing to join the modern Hasidic community of New York (the hub of Hasidim in the United States) via

conversion, either from a past as a Gentile or less observant Jew, gain a social identity and acceptance by their new peers.

It is interesting to note that among modern syncretic language practices, it is only among the Hasidim that the gendered nature of said method of speech is rooted in religious practices and identity, rather than the much more frequent, "political economies and class or ethnic identities" (Kulick 357). One cannot help but harp on the relationship between Yiddish, syncretic Yiddish (to be referred to from here on as, "Hasidic Yiddish," in the style of Fader herself) and the sense of social (and, in this case, the subsequently and irrevocably linked, religious) identity, as this is the quintessential function of speaking Yiddish today. To give more evidence to the claim that Hasidic Yiddish is linked to a distinct religious identity (that of various modern Hasidic sects), one should note that, "scholarship on evangelical Christians in North America has similarly documented the importance of syncretism" (Hendershot).

"Hasidic men and women both claim that Yiddish is inherently a more moral language as a medium of life in Eastern Europe which was a better, more moral time." (Fader 11) It is interesting to note here how the Hasidic community's use of the word "better," unveils another example of one of their core societal tenants, which is insularity. Such insularity is a source of pride, with one of the Hasidic Yiddish-speaking teachers in a girls' school in Brooklyn interviewed by Fader, saying, "In Yiddish, certain terms or ideas from 'today's world' cannot even be articulated." It is this

separation which is the root of the modern Hasids' belief in Yiddish as the most, "moral edifying, and more authentically Jewish [Hasidic] language" (Fader 11).

Gendered Yiddish: *"Babytalk,"* Nostalgia, and Women

It is interesting in this culture that superficially, at least, appears to heavily subjugate women has a feminine symbol for what, to them, is a source of great pride – Yiddish. The nickname "mamaloshen," translated as, "mother tongue," is invocative of the feminine in that it frequently is linked with the quintessentially Jewish caricature of the 19th century Eastern-European, Yiddish-speaking, Jewish mother (Seidman, N.). Continuing to harp on the feminine, even the most rudimentary understanding of the dynamics of modern Yiddish requires acknowledgement of the gendered nature of the language, which is at least partially how the Hasidic community successfully maintains the gendered identities necessary to their ethno-religious doctrine.

Much of the gendered nature of Yiddish[2] can be attributed to the lifestyle, and, thus, gender roles, that exists and have existed among the Hasidim. Yiddish has a complex relationship to modern Hasidic Jews' historical identity, because much of their motivation for using it stems from a nostalgia for pre-World War II Eastern Europe. Despite the prevalence of Hasidic Yiddish today, young (i.e. prior to school) boys and

[2] I refer here not to the language itself [Yiddish] being gendered, but to the gendered nature of a) their relationship/dynamic with Yiddish, and b) the gendered nature of the usage [literate among women, but more prevalent in spoken contexts with men].

girls in this Hasidic community typically dominantly speak traditional, formalized Yiddish because the *babytalk*[3] register strays far from Hasidic Yiddish and more closely emulates the purer Yiddish of times past (Fader 12). One can construe from the historical timeline that this practice is yet another example of how speaking Yiddish can be a marker of identity. Because that more traditional Yiddish was what the first Hasidic immigrant grandparents spoke to their grandchildren, women in the next few generations (there not being that many between the post-World War II immigration and today) have continued addressing their children and grandchildren in a parallel way. This makes sense for two reasons, the first being that girls and women are the primary caretakers of children at this age and they are the gender in this community that is schooled more extensively in "real" Yiddish, and the second being that Eastern-European-rooted nostalgia (noting the correlation in the Hasidim's mind between women/the feminine and *mameloshen*.

The roots of the above-referenced nostalgia likely at least partially stem from the way girls are taught Yiddish in Hasidic schools. Since English is used for secular subjects and Yiddish for religious ones, female students associate Yiddish with content areas closely related to buzzwords such as, "nostalgia," and, "moral." In fact, wondering where this belief of Yiddish as the pure, "moral," language is mostly unnecessary, given that a first grade Yiddish reader used by the Bnos Tsiyon School of

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[3] This is the register of a language (it does not exist in all languages) that people, typically women, speak to small children/babies in, or, even, small animals in some cultures. It is noted for its increased pitch, simplified sentences and vocabulary, and "conversations" that frequently include the caregiver playing both speaking roles.

the Bobover sect, ends its introduction with the statement, “They [the Yiddish stories in the primer] will, with God’s help, take to reading about our holy forefathers […] and bring themselves closer to the *garden of ethical writings in Yiddish*” (Fader 13 [emphasis mine]). When further looking at the content of these Yiddish primary readers, one finds there is a pattern of idealized associated content that directly correlates with the relationship women have with Yiddish and their feelings towards speaking it, particularly with their children (which are strong, as is noted in my explication of their use of the *babytalk* register). Within this pattern, one finds stories focusing on, “the Yiddish language, life in pre-War Eastern Europe, aspirations to a higher moral life, and authentic religiosity” (Fader 14).

As soon as children enter school in the modern Hasidic community (age three), they are separated by gender. During this preschool period (until first grade/age six), teachers address the children in Hasidic Yiddish. Once students move on to grade school, it is boys who are taught to be Yiddish speakers (though not necessarily fluent readers and writers), with English beginning until a few years later and being given an almost comical lack of importance (Fader 13). This Yiddish focus among the boys and English among the girls serves a crucial purpose of upholding gender roles (whereby Yiddish, which, as has been established, is connoted with nostalgia, a sense of social superiority, and, thus, masculinity). Despite Yiddish’s importance to belonging within

the Hasidic community, it makes sense that women have more of a facility in English[4] because they, as the ones not engaged in constant Torah study and thereby are running the home, must make more contact with the secular world, in which English is not just a class (as it is often for the boys) but a critical tool.

Going back to the fact that Hasidic schools are gender-segregated from the beginning (to say nothing of the strict gender roles that exists within their society), one can draw the conclusion that teaching Yiddish in schools is obviously part of the language socialization process, but, more interestingly, that it is gendered. In fact, the gendered use of Yiddish and the existence (and, again, gendered use of) Hasidic Yiddish, can be rooted to the way in which children are taught Yiddish (i.e. language socialization). Looking at how girls are given Yiddish readers (like the one referenced above), they are set up for a distinct type of religious learning. That Yiddish-based religious learning which they are exposed to (with the exclusion of all but the most elementary Hebrew) gives them access to only the parts of religious doctrine that have been translated into Hebrew, and thus have been deemed acceptable for women to read. Because boys do not focus on written Yiddish as much, but speak it for a greater proportion of their day (as they have fewer and less time devoted to secular subjects), their religious education is able to more focus on both Hebrew and religious content,

[4] To clarify, women speak better and more "formal," Yiddish, both in the classroom, where they must study it, and in the home, where, as noted, it is prevalent in speaking with young children. Men are more adept in Hasidic Yiddish, which they are both encouraged to use and which forms the core linguistic mode of communication in their schools, and, then, yeshivas.

rather than the teaching of the language of instruction, as is the case sometimes with girls. (Fader 14) From this, one draws that Yiddish here works as a tool of the patriarchy in modern Hasidic communities (just as it did in days past, when women could only access Yiddish women's magazines and stories, rather than the books and references the men could with their Hebrew education), by not even restricting access, but rather, implementing a system that restricts access to religious material to women. (This is only relevant because if one considers that the language of instruction and lingua franca for the community were Hebrew, as is practically the only other option, such a disparity of information access would not exist.)

One cannot address the role of Yiddish among the Hasids, especially the women, without addressing that of English, because, at this point, they are inextricably linked (due partially to the nature of their lives among English-speaking citizens, but also to their educational system). While it is completely necessary for Hasidic women (and thus, wives) to speak English (and this is seen directly in the set-up and implementation of their education system), it is actually a source of pride or prestige for a Hasidic man to be able to claim to not speak English or to hardly speak any (Fader 16). This is because it implies that his domain is so rooted in Torah study that he has never had time to learn English. (In the Hasidic community, the greatest thing a man or husband can do is to become a master of the Torah, or at least spend his life trying to do so.) In contrast, women draw their pride from being good homemakers and wives (or so society attempts to dictate they do). As English assists in that, it is their parallel source

of pride, and the reason that adult Hasidic women frequently speak English with one another. Here again, lies evidence of Yiddish's prevalence throughout the community (do not forget that those women who are speaking English with one another are also speaking Yiddish to their husbands and small children) as well as its gendered nature, with the two genders having different roles for Yiddish in their lives, affective relationships to the language, and methods of exposure/instruction.

History of Yiddish in Post-WWII America: How Yiddish Gained the Role it has Today

There are many theories in modern scholarship on the role of Yiddish that theorize what exactly made Yiddish staunchly remain the language of the Hasidim long past when most of its other speakers switched to the local lingua franca. To begin, the Hasidim were bringing Yiddish with them to a new country they didn't necessarily want to be immigrating to – America. They were here because many of their homes (and their families, friends, and fellow congregants) and *shtetls* were destroyed during the Holocaust. This foreign land had a secular culture (particularly in the cities, where the Hasidim mainly settled) that the pious feared, and thus continuing to speak Yiddish gave them both a sense of community where they were outsiders and created a linguistic barrier to assimilation. This line of reasoning continues into the present to be a main motivation for the Hasids to uphold Yiddish as their *mameloshen.* However, Yiddish was not destined to survive in America. When looking at *why* the Hasidim still speak it today, despite its anachronistic nature, one must see that both that they had no choice

but to come to America and that in America they had no choice but to keep speaking Yiddish. (As to other options, Jeffrey Shandler, a Judaic Studies professor at Rutgers University, notes that Eastern Europe, what had prior to World War II been the hotbed of Yiddish speakers and culture, was in decline due to, "Stalin's liquidation of Soviet Yiddish culture.") To conclude, one must reiterate how integral America and its specific circumstances were crucial to the Hasidim speaking Yiddish. They did not immigrate post-World War II in droves to Israel, like many Jews, but to America, like a fairly large proportion. (It is relevant to note here that, had they immigrated to Israel, they would likely use Yiddish differently, especially because they would likely [in greater numbers than they are today] be bilingual in English and Hebrew, including the girls, which would turn the modern dynamic the Hasidim have with Yiddish on its head.)

It also makes sense that the Hasidim, as a sizable facet in modern Jewish community, use Yiddish bilingually, either with English or Hebrew (noting its gendered nature, once again), because "its [Yiddish's] speakers have always been in contact with non-Jews and have always been multilingual" (Shandler 100). There are, in fact, interesting parallels that can be drawn between the linguistic dynamics of the modern Hasidic community and the medieval Jewish one. In fact, just as the medieval era predates the beginning of Hasidim, it also predates their complex and gendered relationship to Yiddish, and thus it makes sense that the modern diglossia in Hasidic men is denotatively identical to that of their forefathers; "[The] relationship of Yiddish and Loshn-Koydesh is not primarily based on semantics-say, the 'secular' vs. the

'holy'- but is a matter of function: Yiddish is the spoken language, Loshn-koydesh is the written language." (Weinreich) As has been illustrated thus far, the modern Hasidim's relationship to Yiddish is one primarily based on identity, but it is important to acknowledge that in an identity so based in religious piety that the roots of a modern linguistic practice are highly religious in origin as well, to the point that the modern modifiers of "secular" and "holy" to Yiddish and Hebrew respectively can only be applied because of how the Hasidim have chosen to use those two languages today, which is to say they are directly emulating those forefathers.

Examining the tangible practices related to Yiddish today in the Hasidic community, one must note that just as much of the modern Hasidic practices and rituals are a continuation of tradition stemming from 19th century *shtetl* Europe, so are this same group's linguistic socialization. A description of how a young Jewish boy is taught literacy, one sees the parallels to the boys' Hasidic preschools mentioned previously – "Whatever instructions were given to the child – 'now say this; now do this' – would not have been uttered in Hebrew but in the language be already knew from home, Yiddish" (Shandler 101). Although Hasidic women today are taught to read Yiddish (and some men do as well), the lack of emphasis on reading and writing Yiddish in modern boys' Hasidic schools is parallel to the culture of 19th century Eastern Europe (their cultural origins), where, "there was no institutionalized instruction in reading Yiddish in traditional Ashkenaz" (Shandler 102).

However, Jews not too long after this era began to reevaluate the role Yiddish should play in Jews' lives, and the side that campaigned for modern Yiddish education (A. Liessin, Y.L. Peretz, and Chaim Zhitlowsky, notably) inarguably provided the foundation for the modern Hasidic community to run a Yiddish-language school system, if not only by providing a basis for curricula (Shandler 103). It is in this time period (post-World War II) that the foundation for the basis of the identity and concurrent nostalgia the Modern Hasidim have with Yiddish became explicit, as, "the emergence of Yiddish education at this time among […] Jews suggests that it was in large measure responsive to the immigrant generations' sense of disjuncture[5] from the Old World […] This impulse was fundamentally different from the concomitant development of Yiddish-language schooling in Eastern Europe" (Shandler 104). It is this, "fundamental difference," that is of interest, because it was only in America that Yiddish was being taught at this time while an intensely strong sense of Jewish identity was developing an irrevocable link to it.

Looking at exactly how Yiddish is taught at the beginning level, one notes an interesting example that two of the first words children practice reading are, "*kar* (tram) and *rak* (crayfish)" (Shandler 105). These two words look odd at first, until one sees that modern Yiddish education (which is very close in form to that of the post-World

[5] This "disjuncture" is closely linked to the idea that the proliferation of Yiddish among Modern Hasidic communities today stems from their internalized cultural belief that it is close to the, "old world," or pre-War Europe, which is idealized since the underlying axiom of much Hasidic behavior (i.e. their standard of dress and its parallels to their forefathers) is that, "a perceived distance from earlier forms of Judaism is understood as a form of degeneracy and contamination from the secular world" (Fader 14).

War I Yiddish secular schools, in terms of pedagogy) is designed with bilingual instruction in mind. (Yiddish is read left to right, where one could misread the words if reading in the wrong direction; this is a reasonable skill to teach first when one realizes that the authors' implicitly must have assumed the child was learning English concurrently, and thus used to learning to read in the opposite direction.) Modern Hasidic schools draw much of their inspiration and practices from these earlier Yiddish schools[6] (albeit not all, their being secular and the Hasid's piety do not combine well), likely because, despite ideologically differences, they are teaching children parallel content in a parallel environment. When noting that of the different kinds of Yiddish education pioneered in America post-World War I from which I claim the Modern Hasids draw so much educational inspiration that, "Yiddish primers used in Orthodox Talmud Torahs include Bible stories and other texts validating religious traditions, whereas primers issued by the Farband promote Labor Zionist ideals[7]" (Shandler 107). Just as modern Jews exist on a spectrum from secular to Hasidic, so did the Jews of this commencing era of formalized Yiddish instruction. Thus, it is not impossible to continue to argue that the Modern Hasids glean much of their curricula and pedagogy

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[6] This inspiration from previous generations does not extend into the relationship the modern Hasidic community has with modern Yiddish teaching and its curricula/materials. Miriam Isaacs notes, "there is virtually no contact between the writers and teachers of Yiddish in the secular and Hasidic communities, which are separated by an 'iron curtain.'"

[7] Shandler notes the obvious fact as well that the IWO Yiddish language literacy textbooks published in the 1930's [the above era in question] were highly ideologically persuasive, going so far as to merge the first two letters of the Yiddish alphabet [alef and beys] with the hammer and sickle. It is with similar deft skill in children's propaganda that modern Hasidim are able to use not only the content they teach [Yiddish, here] with the way they teach it so as to further indoctrinate the primary-aged students to their ideology and subsequent insularity.

not just from Hasidic sources, but from these earlier Yiddish schools who existed on a similarly fundamentalist wavelength.

"Thus, the earliest American Hasidic publication intended specifically to teach the language [Yiddish] appears to be *Unzer bukh,* first issued by the educational organization of the Lubavitcher (C/Habad) Hasdidm in 1969" (Shandler 112). However, today one can find various Yiddish written materials for children's pleasure and pedagogy in Jewish bookstores catering to the Hasidim in neighborhoods like Boro/Borough Park and Crown Heights. Some notable materials are a 1977 Yiddish primer from the Bobover sect and a coloring book teaching the gender of common nouns from the Satmar Hasids circa 1970 (Grintsvayg). It is within the subtext of these Yiddish-teaching materials that there are fragments of the Hasids prevailing ideology and culture, further supporting the argument that Yiddish is not only crucial to their identity, but, that as the token speakers of it in America nowadays, they are able to use it as a tool to shape and influence the next generation with exceptional precision and ability (notably, Hasidic parents of Yiddish speakers don't need to limit their children's access to Yiddish reading materials the same way they do with English ones because, *as the token speakers,* they literally control their children's modern media selection in Yiddish). For example, some of these children's materials contain no human figures (in keeping the Hasid's strict interpretation of one biblical commandment) or the figures appear without faces (Grintsvayg).

It is because of these Hasidic enclaves uniquely today that there are native Yiddish speakers in America, and it is the above described Yiddish-focused education system that will proliferate the Hasidic community in size and scope. In fact, Shandler claims that the combination of the Hasidic postwar population curve and their current education system, that, "there is increased likelihood of Yiddish growth with increased distance from the immigrant generation." Not only have the modern Hasidic communities managed to extend the life of Yiddish by at least several generations already, but they have also managed to take a Jewish language and adapt it to be their own (i.e. Hasidic Yiddish). As the token speakers, they have managed to imbue the Yiddish of today with their own social, ethnic, and cultural values (notably gender roles). Yiddish would not exist today had it not been for the social and cultural environment that allowed Yiddish to flourish in the years post-World War II when many of the Hasidic Jews who live in North America today were immigrating. That same environment, one internally motivated by insularity and one externally motivated by general societal strife (then, it was post World War II, now, it's rampant poverty and urban life among the Hasidic Jews of New York City). To conclude, looking at how the Hasidic Jews already have and still are creating schools and curriculum/materials for Yiddish, it is doubtful that Yiddish will lose the place it has regained today. Just as Shandler said and was noted, they are a growing population and they are steadfastly committed to the propagation of Yiddish – a perfect combination for a dying language.

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