

Oberlin College/Spring 2015

Jewish Studies/History 223

## **Introduction to Modern Yiddish Culture**

Dr. Gil Ribak

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Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:15-3:15 PM and by appointment

**Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:00-10:15 AM (Rice 100B)**



### **Course Description:**

Yiddish has been the language of Ashkenazi Jews for nearly a millennium. By 1939 it was the language of approximately 11 million Jews, comprising more than two-thirds of world Jewry. Since the early Middle Ages Yiddish had been intimately interwoven into Jewish life and closely involved in the evolution of Jewish religious practices, customs and folkways. In more recent

times Yiddish served as the vehicle for the proliferation of an array of movements such as Hasidism, nationalism, and socialism. As Jewish immigration to Western Europe, North and South America, the Land of Israel, Australia, and South Africa created new centers of Yiddish-speaking populations, Yiddish educational institutions, literature, theater and press developed and achieved a high level of creativity and ingenuity.

Yet the emergence of modern Yiddish culture was highly contested, reflecting the vicissitudes of modern Jewish identity and internal debates on the future of the Jewish people. The course is an introduction to the modern Yiddish civilization, serving as a historical overview of the major developments, figures, and movements in modern Yiddish culture, especially from the early 19th century to the present. We will discuss the vicissitudes of modern Jewish identity and internal debates about the future of the Jewish people. The course contents include readings (in English translation) of modern Yiddish thought, literature, and cinema.

### **Course Requirements:**

This class requires attendance, preparation, and active participation.

**Attendance:** Attendance in lecture is required and constitutes 10% of your final grade. I will take attendance each time and any student who misses THREE or more lectures throughout the semester will get an “F” grade (for those 10% of the final grade). Any student who misses **25% or more** of the course’s total number of lectures will FAIL the class. If extenuating circumstances such as illness force a student to miss one or more classes, please email me. The student remains responsible for the material covered during her/his absence. A physician’s note is required in such a case. If a circumstance hinders your ability to attend regularly or fulfill other requirements, please see me as soon as possible. **Tardiness** is disruptive to the class and unacceptable. If a student is tardy (arriving more than TWO minutes after the beginning of class) THREE times, it will constitute one unexcused absence. The same goes for leaving class before it ends.

**Preparation:** I cannot overemphasize the importance of your reading assignments. You are expected to read ALL the assigned materials in advance of class, and be prepared to discuss them. A failure to read the assigned materials will affect your final grade. If a class session is cancelled for any reason, e.g., inclement weather, prepare as usual for that missed class day, and prepare the next class reading for its scheduled time: in any case you should stay current with the syllabus. I may examine your level of preparation even unexpectedly (e.g. with a pop quiz).

**Participation:** informed participation in class is required and will affect your grade. I welcome your *informed* input during class, and may call on you.

## **Final Grade Breakdown:**

Attendance – 10%

Participation, preparation, oral report (each student must deliver one report in class and submit a write up), and possible pop quizzes – 25% (combined)

Midterm exam – 20%

Term paper – 20%

Final exam – 25%.

Please note: late assignments will lose 10 points for every day late.

>99%	A+
96-99%	A
92-95%	A-
88-91%	B+
84-87%	B
78-83%	B-
74-77%	C+
69-73%	C
65-68%	C-
60-64%	D
Below 60%	F

## **Standards of Student Conduct:**

The use of computers in class is STRICTLY FORBIDDEN. The ONLY exception would be students who can provide an authorization from the learning disabilities office (<http://new.oberlin.edu/office/disability-services/documentation/>) detailing a learning disability that requires the use of a computer. The use of texting, cell phones and pagers is also strictly forbidden. Students violating these rules will be asked to leave the class for the day, and will have an absence recorded for that date.

## **Standards of Academic Integrity and the Honor Code:**

As all courses in Oberlin, this course operates under the Honor Code, including but not limited to, prohibition of plagiarism. Students are responsible for understanding and adhering to the Code. Information about the Honor Code is available on the College website and the Honor Code committee.

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is the appropriation and subsequent passing off of another's ideas or words as one's own. If the words or ideas of another are used, acknowledgement of the original source must be made through recognized referencing practices. Use of another's ideas or words must be properly acknowledged as follows:

- (1) Direct Quotation: Any use of direct quotation must be acknowledged by footnote citation and by either quotation marks or proper indentation and spacing.
- (2) Paraphrase: If another's ideas are borrowed in whole or in part and are merely recast in the student's own words, proper acknowledgement must, nonetheless, be made. A footnote or proper internal citation must follow the paraphrased material.

For more information, see <http://www.oberlin.edu/library/avoiding-plagiarism.html>

## **Required books:**

David E. Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture

Joachim Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful: Yiddish Stories from 1382 to the Present

The assigned books are available for purchase at the campus bookstore. They are also available on reserve at the Mudd Library. ALL the other readings are available online via Blackboard.  
**There are no excused failures to obtain the readings.**

# Primary or literary sources (online)

\* Scholarly sources (online)

## **Lectures and Reading**

(Note: weekly readings are due on the FIRST meeting of the week)

### **(Tue., Feb. 3): Introduction – What Is Yiddish? Origins, Geography, and Dialects**

\* Max Weinreich, History of the Yiddish Language, 1-5, 175-181

### **(Thu., Feb. 5): The Emergence of Hasidic Yiddish Culture and the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) Movement**

Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, vi-x, 3-15, 18-32

Dov Ber ben Shmuel of Linets, From “In Praise of the Baal-Shem-Tov” (1815), Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 101-104

Rabbi Nakhman of Braslev, “A Tale of a King’s Son Who Was Switched at Birth”, Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 121-137

Yitsik-Yoyl Linyetsky, *The Hasidic Boy*, Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 175-189

# Isaac Dov Levinsohn, “Yiddish Is a Corrupt Jargon”, Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), The Jew in the Modern World, 380

# Menahem-Mendel of Kotsk, “I am not a God”, Lucy S. Dawidowicz (ed.), The Golden Tradition, 100-102

# Mendeley Moykher Sforim, Fishke the Lame (translated by Gerald Stillman), 17-88

**(Tue., Feb. 10 and Thu., Feb. 12): The Grandfather of Modern Yiddish Literature – Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitch)**

**[The movie *Fishke der Krumer* will be shown in class]**

# Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Fishke the Lame*, 89-216

\* Gershon Shaked, "'A Groan from a Broken Heart': Mendele's *Fishke the Lame* as a Demand for Responsibility", *The New Tradition*, 194-215

**(Tue., Feb. 17 and Thu., Feb. 19): The Classic Writers – Sholem Aleichem (Sholem N. Rabinovitch) and Yitsik Leybush Peretz**

Yitsik Leybush Peretz, "On the Stagecoach", Neugroschel (ed.), *No Star Too Beautiful*, 273-286

# Peretz, "Bontshe Shvayg", Ruth R. Wisse (ed.), *I. L. Peretz Reader*, 146-152

# Sholem Aleichem, "Dreyfus in Kasrilevke", *The Best of Sholem Aleichem*; and "The Clock that Struck Thirteen", *Selected Stories*, 89-96

\* David Roskies, "Sholem Aleichem, Mythologist of the Mundane" *AJS Review* 13 (1988): 27-46

**(Tue., Feb. 24 and Thu., Feb. 26): Politics and Language – Nationalism and Socialism**

Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 48-79

Mordkhe Spector, from *The Jewish Muzhik*, Neugroschel (ed.), *No Star Too Beautiful*, 238-250

# Simon Dubnov, "From Jargon to Yiddish", Joseph Leftwich (ed.), *Great Yiddish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, 519-527

# The Bund, "Decisions on the Nationality Question" (1899, 1901, 1905, 1910), Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World*, 339-343

# Abraham Liessin, "When Yiddish Literature Became Socialist", Dawidowicz (ed.), *The Golden Tradition*, 422-426

\* Yael Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine*, 1-25

**(Tue., March 3, and Thu., March 5): Language Disputes – Hebraists vs. Yiddishists**

Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 15-17, 83-113

# “Czernowitz Conference of the Yiddish Language”, Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz (eds.), The Jew in the Modern World, 404-405

# Nathan Birnbaum, “Contra Zionism”, Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz (eds.), The Jew in the Modern World, 648-650

# Chaim Zhitlowsky, “What Is Jewish Secular Culture?”, Joseph Leftwich (ed.), Great Yiddish Writers of the Twentieth Century, 91-99

# Ahad Ha-am, excerpt from “The Spiritual Revival”, Selected Essays, 279-285

**(Tue., March 10, and Thu., March 12): In the New World – a Mega-*Shtetl* on the Hudson?**

**(Midterm exam: Thursday, March 12)**

**[The movie *Uncle Moses* will be shown in class]**

Leon Kobrin, “Apartment No. Four”, Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 534-540

Avrom Reyzen, “The Jew Who Destroyed the Temple”, Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 563-566

# Sholem Aleichem, Motl the Cantor’s Son, 264-268

# Yehoash, “Lynching”, Jules Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 142

**(Tue., March 17, and Thu., March 19): Yiddish Theater and Yiddish Press**

# A collection of letters from “A Bintl Briv” (a bundle of letters), Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 298-308

\* Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers, 518-554

\* Joel Berkowitz, “This Is Not Europe, You Know: The Counter-Maskilic Impulse of American Yiddish Drama”, Edward S. Shapiro (ed.), Yiddish in America, 135-165

**March 21-29 – Spring break**

**(Tue., March 31, and Thu., April 2): Yiddish and the Jewish Labor Movement in America**

# Morris Rosenfeld, “The Sweatshop”, Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (eds.), The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, 84

# “The Beginnings of Secular Jewish Schools”, Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz (eds.), The Jew in the Modern World, 502-504

\* Isaiah Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement” YIVO Annual 16 (1976): 342-393

**(Tue., April 7, and Thu., April 9): The Soviet Experience – The Ramifications of Stalinism**

**(Term Paper is due on Thursday, April 9)**

Moyshe Kulbak, “Zelmenyaners”, Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 607-620

# Samuel Gordon, “A Soviet Shtetl”, Joseph Leftwich (ed.), Great Yiddish Writers of the Twentieth Century, 813-818

# Leyb Kvitko, “Russian Death”, Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk (eds.), The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, 298

# Perets Markish, “Hey, Women, Spotted with Typhus...”, Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk (eds.), The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, 348-350

# Itsik Fefer, “So what if I’ve been circumcised”, Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk (eds.), The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, 546-548

\* Judah L. Graubart, “The Night of the Murdered Poets”, Joshua A. Fishman (ed.), Never Say Die! A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters, 485-493

**(Tue., April 14, and Thu., April 16): *Khurbm* (The Holocaust)**

**[The movie *Our Children* will be shown in class]**

Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, 139-153

Rokhl Korn, “The End of the Road”, Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 633-641

# Sholem Asch, One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians, 44-52

# Jacob Glatstein, “Good Night, World”, Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 373-374; and Glatstein, “Smoke”, Kramer and Lishinsky (eds.), The Last Lullaby, 210

# Kadya Molodowsky, “Merciful God”, Kramer and Lishinsky (eds.), The Last Lullaby, 208-209

# Avrom Sutzkever, “Frozen Jews”, Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk (eds.), The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, 680



**(Tue., April 21, and Thu., April 23): Postwar American Yiddish Culture**

Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, 126-137

Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Mirror", Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful, 671-679

# Cynthia Ozick, "Envy, Or Yiddish in America", Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 858-896

# H. Leyvik, "To America", Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 287-289

**(Tue., April 28, and Thu., April 30): Yiddish in Ultra-Orthodox Communities**

**[The movie *A Gesheft* will be shown in class]**

# Excerpt from Rabbi Jerahmeel Israel Isaac Domb, The Transformation: The Case of the Neturei Karta, 98-103

\* Miriam Isaacs, "Contentious Partners: Yiddish and Hebrew in Haredi Israel", International Journal of the Sociology of Language 138 (1999): 101-121

\* Solomon Poll, "The Role of Yiddish in American Ultra-Orthodox and Hassidic Communities", YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science 13 (1965): 125-152

**(Tue., May 5, and Thu., May 7): An End or a Renaissance?**

\* Simon J. Bronner, "From *landsmanshaften* to *vinkln*: Mediating Community among Yiddish Speakers in America", Jewish History 15 (2001): 131-148

\* Jeffrey Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture, 155-176

\* Jon G. Auerbach, "They Can't Spell It, Can't Pronounce It and Don't Get It --- So Why Does Every Tom, Dick and Herschel Use Yiddish?" Wall Street Journal, June 2, 1998

**Final Exam: Thursday, May 14 @ 2:00-4:00 PM.**

**No early or late exams will be permitted.**