



Young Israelis turning to Yiddish in search for roots

By Sue Fishkoff · May 3, 2010

BEERSHEVA, Israel (JTA) -- Nufal Levanon, a 25-year-old student at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, says she rarely heard Yiddish growing up, although her Romanian-born parents both were native speakers of the language.

“They’d call each other ‘ziskele,’ my sweetie, but that’s about it,” Levanon recalls.

Meira Goodman, 24, only became interested in Yiddish after her Czech-born grandmother died three years ago.

“I didn’t hear much Yiddish from her, but even when she spoke English, it sounded Yiddish because of the intonation,” she says.

Both women are enrolled in a new Yiddish literature class at Ben-Gurion University, and Goodman also is taking a course in Yiddish language. They are part of a revival of interest in Yiddish among young Israelis.

For their grandparents who were Israel’s founders, Yiddish bore the emotional baggage of a reminder of the ghettos they had left behind in Europe. But for young Israelis in increasing numbers, Yiddish is a point of connection with their Jewish roots.

Like many of her generation, Goodman’s mother, the child of a Holocaust survivor, wanted nothing to do with the language of Europe’s destroyed Jewish civilization.

“She swept it under the rug,” Goodman says. “Now our generation is digging it up. We are unburying these hidden treasures.”

In recognition of this steadily growing interest, Ben-Gurion University this spring launched a new Center for Yiddish Studies housed in the department of Hebrew literature. The idea is to create an academic fellowship of Yiddish scholars already working in the field and reach out to larger audiences with conferences, publications, analysis of the Yiddish press from Eastern Europe and perhaps even stagings of classic Yiddish theater pieces.

Professor David Roskies, a renowned Yiddish scholar from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was tapped to head the center.

Hebrew University, Bar-Ilan University and Tel Aviv University already offer programs in Yiddish language and literature.

Although students of Yiddish have flocked to Israeli universities since Hebrew University opened Israel's first Yiddish department in 1951, the language and its culture have never enjoyed popular respect in the country.

Even before the founding of the state, Hebrew was touted as the language of the new, strong Israeli Jew, while Yiddish represented a defeated world.

The dichotomy grew stronger after independence.

Professor Yechiel Szeintuch, who has taught in the Yiddish department at Hebrew University for 40 years, remembers the postwar years when "people would throw bricks at gatherings of Yiddish speakers" and the country's 300,000 Holocaust survivors tried to refrain from speaking Yiddish in public.

Last December, Szeintuch and three Hebrew University colleagues organized a four-day conference called "A Century of Yiddish," bringing experts from around the world to discuss the trajectory of the language and its culture over the past 100 years.

More than 350 people attended, but when Szeintuch was interviewed about the conference on Israeli radio, he says the show's hosts treated it like a joke.

"They said a conference on Yiddish? What, a bunch of old men peeling apples in the park?" Szeintuch recalls.

Roskies is upbeat about his mandate to create a safe haven for Yiddish studies in the middle of the Negev Desert. As a 40-year veteran of teaching Yiddish at the university level, Roskies says he was stunned his first week at Ben-Gurion to learn that 90 students had signed up for his elective course on the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem.

"There's something amazing going on in this country, and this is just the tip of the iceberg," he says. "There is a spiritual awakening in Israel, a return to one's severed past. Yiddish was pushed aside to make room for Hebrew. This is a third generation not locked into its Oedipal complex."

Roskies sees the revival of interest in Yiddish as part of a much greater phenomenon: young secular Israelis looking for spiritual nourishment within Judaism, but outside the controls of the Orthodox establishment. Independent prayer groups are springing up throughout the country, he says, along with workshops devoted to the study of liturgical poems and Chasidic melodies.

Galia Shauli, 33, who studies Yiddish at Hebrew University, says she was raised "100 percent secular" by her kibbutznik mother and Russian-immigrant father.

"Two or three years ago I started wondering about my roots, about my Judaism," she says. "I was raised to believe [Jewish identity] all started in Israel, but it didn't."

Roskies says one of the challenges of developing Ben-Gurion's new Yiddish studies center is the lack of classic Yiddish literature available in Hebrew. A new Hebrew translation of Sholom Aleichem's Tevye stories, on which "Fiddler on the Roof" was based, came out last fall in Israel and was on the best-seller list for four months, he says. But that's a rarity.

“While Israel was building a state, America was the place of refuge where the severed branches [of Eastern European Jewry] could be collected and preserved,” Roskies says. “Yiddish scholarship existed in Israel, but it was very academic and conducted mostly in Hebrew in order to ‘prove’ they weren’t ‘Yiddishists.’ We didn’t have that problem in America.”

Roskies has no illusions about reviving Yiddish as a living language. Despite the 2 million to 3 million Yiddish speakers in the world today, very few outside the Chasidic world or the very elderly speak it as their first language.

The importance of the new Ben-Gurion center, he says, is to provide a boost to the study of Yiddish culture as a whole within the Jewish state and to help Israelis recover a discarded part of their identity.

“I see it as a peoplehood project,” he says. “I can now bring that severed piece of Jewish culture to Israel, where it can flourish.”

(Sue Fishkoff was a participant in the American Associates, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev’s Murray Fromson Media Mission to Israel.)