

Yiddish in the Diaspora: Language Politics and the Jewish Community in Post-World War II
America

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Religion Department

at Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

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May 2021

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I. Abstract

Yiddish is the lingua franca of the Ashkenazi Jews. Yiddish was marginalized after World War II with the establishment of the State of Israel and the Zionist movement's push to have Hebrew be the national language of the Jews. The decline in the Yiddish language speaks to a rise in Zionism's influence over modern Jews outside the budding nation-state. The retelling of Ashkenazi history reframed the Ashkenazi narrative as desolate and bleak, erasing the rich history that grew through the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora. This thesis incorporates the voices of scholars on the resurgence of the modern Hebrew language, the separate educational experiences of Yiddish language in the United States, and personal recollections of the debate between the importance of Yiddish over Hebrew and Hebrew over Yiddish. I address why Hebrew was chosen as the Jewish language over Yiddish and contextualize the Yiddish language within orthodox and non-orthodox Jewish communities. Losing modern Yiddish allows for a secular movement to set the parameters for the modern Jew, one who speaks Hebrew, not Yiddish, and erases Central and Eastern European Jewish culture.

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II. Introduction

My paternal aunt, who grew up in Canada, recalled how she prefers to be called “*safta*”, Hebrew for grandma, and her husband prefers to be called “*zayde*,” Yiddish for grandpa. This is due to her views about “how regressive Yiddish is” in contrast to Hebrew. My aunt and my father grew up in a Zionist household. They are children of a family of Eastern European immigrants raised in the reform Jewish movement. I grew up hearing stories about my father’s childhood trips to Israel and a summer spent on a kibbutz in Israel. The question of Yiddish has been a fraught one ever since World War II, when many Ashkenazi Jewish survivors of the Holocaust left Europe to settle in historic Palestine (or Israel after 1948) or to the United States. For example, both sides of my family were educated in English because their parents viewed Yiddish as an obstacle towards social mobility. My maternal grandfather continues to speak with sadness about his lack of knowledge of Yiddish because it deprived him of maintaining ties with his extended family, many of whom spoke only Yiddish. Even though I called my father’s parents *bubbe* and *zayde*, grandma and grandpa in Yiddish respectively, my aunt’s preference for Hebrew, or for English in the case of my maternal ancestors, is not surprising. The changing role of Yiddish in Ashkenazi Jewish culture and society is the result of a combination of events: the Holocaust, the growing influence of Zionism, and the adoption of Hebrew as the national language of the State of Israel.

Before the rise of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish tradition developed in exile. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin defines Jewish exile as a continuous event, beginning with the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. “At the most basic level, the term “exile” refers to the period beginning with the destruction of the Temple, the dispersal of the

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Jews, and their politically inferior status. . . Exile refers to a state of absence, points to the imperfection of the world, and sustains the desire for its replacement”.¹ For Krakotzkin, the tradition’s development in exile was a core component to “Jewish conciseness”, a perception of religious self within the context of a wider world history. Jewish languages other than Yiddish also played a key role in the lives of diaspora Jews such as Judeo-Berber, Judea-Spanish, and Judea-Arabic. These languages were woven into the religious, social, and cultural lives of very diverse Jewish communities. After World War II, the Jewish tradition came to be defined more by Zionist ideology and discourse, which prioritized loyalty to the Israeli state as part of its goal to create a sanctuary for the survival of the Jewish people. By making claims over the Jewish people, Zionism and the State of Israel, which promotes Hebrew as the language of the Jews, have redefined what it means to be a Jew in the modern world. For Ashkenazi Jews, the primary victims of the Holocaust, their lives post-World War II were shaped by the redefining Jewish ethics and ideals as many of them immigrated to either the United States or the State of Israel. Through this redefinition of Judaism, the marginalization of Yiddish language and culture greatly affected Ashkenazi Jews in both their religious and social lives.

For many Ashkenazi Jews who migrated to the United States during and after the Holocaust, adopting English became a way to assimilate into American society. This was a way for Jewish parents to provide their children with a better future. Fluency in English would enable social mobility and provide some protection from anti-Semitism. While this was the case for secular or reform Jews, Ashkenazi Orthodox communities continued to promote and maintain

¹. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “History, Exile, and Counter-History: Jewish Perspectives,” in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, 2014: 124.

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Yiddish as their primary language. The pressure to assimilate felt by Jewish immigrants was compounded by the growing influence of Zionism, especially after the Nazis took power in Germany. As a movement, the Zionists did not limit themselves to raising funds to mobilize support for settlers to move to Palestine and to support the creation of Israel. The Zionists also sought to redefine what it means to be Jewish in the modern world. From the Zionist perspective knowledge of Hebrew and loyalty to the State of Israel would transform Jews into a unified community and both these traits are valorized over other ways of being Jewish. Keeping Yiddish alive was one way for Ashkenazi Jews to maintain their traditions, their links to the past and their heritage. Like other languages, Yiddish is not merely the carrier of a tradition, but an integral part of it. For the Ashkenazi Jews, the continuing survival of Yiddish would also ensure that their traditions and customs would continue across generations.

As the language of Central and Eastern European Jewry, Yiddish was central to a centuries-long process of development of traditions and rituals around which Ashkenazi life was organized. Ashkenazi Jewish identity disconnected from Yiddish weakens the links of later generations to the rich history that grew and flourished within Jewish communities in cities and in *shtetls*, which were small Jewish villages in Eastern Europe. Yiddish continues to be a bridge for many Ashkenazi Jews back to their ancestors and providing access to a shared past and history in Europe, but its decline will alter how later generations will relate to their diasporic past. The prioritization of Hebrew over the other Jewish languages, including Yiddish, points to a future of Jewish culture that will eventually erase much of its own history and unique traditions in favor of a more homogenous and cohesive culture.

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In this paper, I discuss how the promotion of Hebrew as the chosen language of the Jewish community has affected the Yiddish speaking Ashkenazi Jews and their culture. This Zionist effort to modernize and unify all Jews through language resulted in a loss of culture and Ashkenazi Jewish history. Yet despite its marginalized status, Yiddish continues to leave cultural marks upon the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition as seen through its continued place in the lives of Ashkenazi Jews.

III. Zionism's Promotion of Modern Hebrew

Well before the State of Israel had been established, the Zionist movement announced that the national language of the Jewish people would be Hebrew. Both the movement and the state sought to unite the diverse population of diaspora Jews into a unified nation and to mold individual subjects whose relationship to Judaism would be mediated by the nationalist narrative of the Zionist movement. A key component of the formation of this modern nation-state and of the modern Jewish subject was education, specifically Hebrew education. Hebrew education served to unify the incoming Jewish settlers who spoke different languages but could rally behind a common Jewish language. The first settlers were bonded by their Zionist vision. Their varied pasts and countries of origins only aided in their shared goals of using Hebrew to unify them in their objective for a Jewish nation-state. Having come from Central and Eastern Europe and influenced by the Enlightenment and the Jewish Enlightenment in their upbringing, the impact of these intellectual movements left upon the first few waves of settlers provided the push they needed to view Hebrew as a touchstone for the formation of the modern Jew and the State of Israel.

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In the diaspora, Ashkenazi Jews in Central and Eastern Europe lived mostly in nation-states that were formed after the different empires of Europe fell. As those empires and dynastic realms began to decline, there began a rise in nationalism. In an examination of Central European politics, Alvydas Jokubaitis comments on the need for a strong sense of nationalism within Central European countries: “The process of state building in Central Europe began with the formation of national consciousness. Traditions of political thought in Central Europe were shaped by the struggle for cultural survival.”² Central Europe’s push to be independent of the fallen empires, their desire to be independent from western European countries, and their need to thrive in the new political landscape in Europe gave extra reason for the emergence of a strong nationalist identity. Tied to nationalism is the “in-group/out-group” mentality in which uniting through shared culture, language, tradition, or history can connect people in a strong sense of self and marginalize the out-group who may live amongst them but not possess the same traits to make them the in-group. In writing about the interactions between Western philosophies and Central European politics, Jokubaitis writes that the formation of the nationalist identity in Central Europe was in reaction to the politics of Western European politics:

National rebirth was not identical to aggressive nationalism but functioned as an important catalyst for cultural modernization. The leaders of national rebirth movements were striving for progress. The social strata that were most active in the formation of nation states had been cut off from the high culture and this is the reason why they thought that it was necessary to assimilate the achievements of the cosmopolitan Western culture. The modernization of states in Central Europe was a process of liberation from narrow nationalism. The leaders of national rebirth movements saw no alternative to the

². Alvydas Jokubaitis, “The Other Europe: Identity Problems of Central Europe,” *Politeja* 57 (2018): 86.

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political formula of Western democracy. They attempted to find a compromise between the culture of their particular nation and democracy.³

With this push to modernize and create national unity, the marginalized out-groups were at the mercy of these new nation-states.

Jewish identity differs from this budding nationalism as they centered it on a genealogical claim to identity, a geographical claim to identity, and a practice of shared customs. For the Jewish tradition, these claims to identity connect different communities of Jews, each with their own traditions, to a history formed in exile from the “holy land”. Zionism united all Jews in a shared history, by returning to the land and promising a return from exile. Without Zionism, Jews in the diaspora still maintain their ability to marry other Jews and carry on the traditions to the next generation. They possess the ability to trace their history, languages and customs to specific countries. They will practice the customs of Jewish faith all independent of the Zionist claim that equates Jewish nationalism with Jewish tradition. Walter Benn Michaels argues that an identity that is built around customs has two options: either be maintained or internalized for the future in the event that one does not practice said customs.⁴ In that event, customs and culture should not be forgotten or ignored. Yiddish operates similarly as a token of Ashkenazi Jewish culture that is trying to be maintained for future generations. Language, like other parts of the Jewish tradition, bonds its communities. Ashkenazi Jews that lived in Central and Eastern Europe were bonded by their shared languages, shared genealogy, shared practices, and

³. Ibid., 87.

⁴. Walter Ben Michaels, quoted in Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 693–725.

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geography, especially if they lived in *shtetls* or ghettos. In the beginning of the twentieth century, they were easily susceptible to anti-Semitic legislation due to their out-group status that did not aid in bolstering the nation-state they would have resided in. For Jews living in Central and Eastern Europe, having to form a national identity was both a challenge. Identification papers almost always listed “Jew” as separate from place of birth. As a Jew, belonging to the out-group was a requirement of living in a nation-state. Until the formation of the State of Israel, Jews had no options of a place to live that allowed them to belong to the in-group, or to form their own nation-state. They then switched from one nation-state dictating how to live in their society to the new Jewish nation-state dictating how to be Jewish.

Formations of how to be a modern Jew for Ashkenazi’s bore out of the Haskalah which began in Central and Eastern Europe to modernize and intellectually “free” the Jews from the segregation from their non-Jewish neighbors and push them towards modernization. For generations Jews had lived by the traditions of their religion and the thinkers of the Haskalah aimed to integrate Jews into secular society. During this hundred-year movement (1770s to 1880s) this age was marked by the push to establish Hebrew language schools and no longer teach Yiddish. One goal of the Jewish Enlightenment was to shift away from living in *shtetls* and integrate Jews into non-Jewish society. Thoughts behind progress, Hebrew, modernization, and the “free Jew” were in direct opposition to the life lived in Central and Eastern Europe during anti-Semitic rule. The negative connotations of Yiddish, living in *shtetls*, lack of progress, oppression, and all-around poor quality of life can be found in the thinking of the Jewish Enlightenment. Later settlers in Palestine and the first teachers of Hebrew were by-products of the Jewish enlightenment: they were influenced by the push to study more secular subjects and

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learn both Hebrew and the languages of the secular nation-states from which they hailed. With that came their drive to modernize the Jew through Hebrew. Highlighting the philosophies of some of the first Hebrew teachers in Palestine such as Yitzhak Epstein, a teacher and pedagogy developer of a method for teaching Hebrew in Hebrew, Tali Tadmor-Shimony and Nirit Raichel recognize that,

Epstein and most of his Eastern European colleagues belonged to a generational unit of enlightened Jews who defined themselves as nationalists and considered religion to be a fundamental, but not exclusive, basis of the Jewish nation... a relatively small group of intellectuals, untrained in pedagogy, was attempting to mold a new generation with an identity different from those of their parents and teachers. One of the prerequisites of which was the use of the sacred language of Jewish ritual as a vibrant spoken language.⁵

This led to the first teachers of Hebrew in Palestine being a by-product of growing up and educating themselves to think that they oversaw defining their own national and religious identity – separate, new, and modern from their past. Tadmor-Shimony and Raichel note that for these teachers “Hebrew education took an active and directed part in molding the newly forming Hebrew society and was required to serve as a major agent of socialization for the Zionist ethos.”⁶ Hebrew was foundational not only to the Zionist ideology, but to the eventual formation of the State of Israel.

Zionist ideology is both complex and narrowly focused. To create and mold a secular nation state, the controlling narrative over the religious reason to return to the region must be precise. Before the creation of the Jewish standard under Zionism, Judaism and Jewish identity

⁵. Tali Tadmor-Shimony and Nirit Raichel, “The Hebrew Teachers as Creators of the Zionist Community in (the Land of) Israel,” *Israel Studies Review* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 124

⁶. *Ibid.*, 121.

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was not confined by speaking any one language. In the diaspora, Jews were bound by their traditions and culture. Once the State of Israel was established, finding a reason to tie people to the land was imperative. The idea of the State of Israel existed in the minds of Jews and Zionists long before a physical boundary was placed on the geography of the country. Knowing this, Raz-Krakotzkin writes that there is a concept of the ‘return to history.’

The phrase “return to history” is commonly associated with a Zionist view of history, where it received its most prominent place... On the theological level... the phrase "return to history" presupposes that there is a "history" from which the Jews alone were excluded ...In this sense, any "return to history," means a return to the history of salvation.⁷

Salvation for Krakotzkin does not just mean keeping the Jews safe from harm in the literal definition of the word. For the Zionist view of history, returning the Jewish people to the historical land of Israel (modern day Palestine) allows for the Jewish people to seek refuge within a space and narrative that they once controlled, but for a time they were lost from. The State of Israel was being designed by the Zionist movement as a homeland for the Jewish people, a refuge if you will after centuries of anti-Semitic attacks, and the most recent attack, the Holocaust.

The premise of a nation-state being both secular and serving its primary function as a refuge for specific people from a persecuted religion is at odds with itself. According to Talal Asad, “Secularist ideology, I would suggest, tries to fix permanently the social and political place of “religion” ... only by compelling religion, as concept and practice, to remain within

⁷. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Jewish Memory between Exile and History,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 536.

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prescribed limits can the transcendent power of the secular state secure liberty of belief and expression.”⁸ For Asad, the controlling nature of a secular governing body places limits on the freedoms of faith and religion. Asad problematizes the secular use of religion in its exclusionary definition. “To define “religion” is first and foremost an act... To define is to leave out some things and to include others... and to stress the centrality of “belief” is to exclude practice without belief. And these definitions are not mere abstract intellectual exercises. They are embedded in passionate social disputes on which the law of the state pronounces.”⁹ The singular definition that secular nation-states operate with does not fully encompass the multitude of beliefs and practices that can be contained within a religious tradition. For the State of Israel to be creating a narrative around salvation, and around a community that was formed in the diaspora, is out of place due to the variety of experiences and histories found within the Ashkenazi Jewish experience alone.

In order to project a strong Jewish image to the world and build a new Israeli-Zionist identity that could withstand any potential future anti-Semitic based decimation, unity amongst the Jewish people was needed in the wake of the Holocaust. This was quite difficult without international assent amongst Jews. European Jews were largely displaced after World War II. Prior to the world wars of the twentieth century, most Jews considered themselves to be living in “exile” from their holy land. These diaspora Jews centered their narrative around a history of being in exile.

⁸. Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s ‘The Meaning and End of Religion,’” *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (February 2001): 221.

⁹. *Ibid.*, 220

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In order to be in exile in a certain place (i.e., Jewish in a certain place), the Jew must first of all be perceived as part of the framework because only in this way would his self-definition in relation to the dominant culture become clear... Exile is the framework in which the self-definition is formed within the tension between self-image and the self-image in the eyes of the other—the gentile.¹⁰

Salvation for Krakotzkin does not just mean keeping the Jews safe from harm in the literal definition of the word. Krakotzkin's critique lies in the metaphorical salvation of the Jews as the Zionist movement moving forward had the motivation to establish a Jewish language, Hebrew, in order to unify their new nation and the global Jewry so that the new framework for self-definition (and non-Jewish recognition of Jews) would depend on a strong and unified body in their forming "homeland". Their new modern state depended on it.

During the time of the British Mandate in Palestine, a vast majority of Jews living in the region were of Ashkenazi descent. By then, the next generation was being raised to speak Hebrew as their first and primary language by those who had first begun settling the land and were being welcomed to help establish more permanent and official language institutions. Hebrew was on the rise, both in the State of Israel and in the United States, where a large percentage of Ashkenazi Jews were immigrating to. With Hebrew on the rise, the framing of what the positive impact Hebrew could have on the next generation of Jewish children aided in Hebrew language dissemination.

The teaching of Hebrew may re-establish for the Jewish relationship between himself and his parents. It may help him to get rid of certain sources of unhealthy psychologic and social complexes. It will restore his self-respect and the respect for his past and his people. He will rediscover a rich cultural heritage which should give him greater strength

¹⁰. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile Within Sovereignty: Critique of 'The Negation of Exile' in Israeli Culture," in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty* (Columbia University Press, 2017): 401.

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of character and psychological poise. It may develop in him a sense of 'noblesse oblige' and a desire through further study to contribute to the cultural values of America.¹¹

Krasner's distinct use of the phrase "noblesse oblige" may speak both to the dream behind modernizing the Jew partially through the modern Hebrew language but also by rebranding the modern Jew as an upright, worthwhile citizen who is a do-gooder. Much like the Jewish value of *tikkun olam* (to repair the world through acts of kindness), "noblesse oblige" refers to the value of acting with generosity towards those of less fortune.

This drive for Hebrew resonated with some and not with others. In 1913 there was the "battle of the languages": a disagreement over the official language of the *Technion* in Haifa. A collection of schools, and a soon-to-be new college, was being established with primary instruction in German alongside Hebrew language courses. Teachers and students demanded the school teach in Hebrew, not German. This led to months of strikes across various cities, and eventually the Zionist Federation backed the use of Hebrew as the language of instruction. Hebrew was proving to be a formidable force against the other Jewish languages.

IV. Ideological Divides in the Yiddish Hebrew Debate

For new generations of Ashkenazi Jews in America, Yiddish served as a link to a life that they had been violently uprooted from. Community debates over the maintenance and the use of Yiddish varied. In the United States, before the rise of the Zionist movement, there was steady support for Yiddish language schools and Yiddish curriculum in Jewish communities. The

¹¹. Jonathan Krasner, "The Limits of Cultural Zionism in America: The Case of Hebrew in the New York City Public Schools, 1930-1960," *American Jewish History* 95, no. 4 (December 2009): 356.

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Zionist movement's growing influence in shaping the discussions about what it meant to be Jewish affected discussions on the place of Yiddish in defining communal life. Like other European nationalist movements, the Zionists argued they could secure the unity of the Jewish nation by adopting Hebrew as the national language. The adoption of Hebrew would also solidify an unbreakable connection to the past of the Jewish community because it was the language of their ancient texts. The regeneration of Hebrew would also mean the decline of Yiddish in the United States.

Yiddish was the language of Central and Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews. Many of them were bilingual, fluent in both Yiddish and one of the other European languages. The population of Yiddish Speakers declined slowly after the Jewish Enlightenment as an increasing number of Jews turned away from their traditions in favor of assimilation into modern, secular, European societies. Immigration to the United States played a role in the decline of Yiddish as Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants were known to be opposed to teaching their children Yiddish to further assimilate their children into American society. While the United States does not have an official national language, English is the language of instruction in public schools and higher education, used in businesses, on official documents, the courts and seen as a sign of being "American". This pressure to assimilate to a national norm in which American identity was bound up with fluency in the English language was in some respects not unlike the pressures that Jews experienced in some European countries where they were denied the status of citizenship. Yiddish, in these countries, was perceived as a marker of difference, and abandoning it for the national language seen as a potential path to escape widespread anti-Semitism.

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The development of Yiddish cannot be disentangled from the modern history and development of Ashkenazi Jewish culture. The links between language and culture are apparent from the Yiddish terms that seeped into the English spoken by Jewish immigrants of the early twentieth century and by later generations of American Jews. Peppered into everyday vernacular, the links to Yiddish are kept alive with simple terms such as *bupkis* (nothing), *chutzpah* (to have the gall: either positive or negative), *goy* (a non-Jew), *klutz* (clumsy), *kvetch* (to complain), *mazel tov* (a congratulatory phrase), *mensch* (an honorable person), *schlep* (to carry tediously), *schmooze* (to chat up, intending to gain favor), *schtick* (a talent one has), *tchotchke* (a trinket), *verklemp* (overcome with emotions). As they disseminated these words and phrases into non-Jewish vernacular, Yiddish lost some of its cultural touchstones. In 2012, Yiddish art critic, Rokhl Kafrissen spoke about the importance of not only teaching Yiddish but also keeping Yiddish culture alive. Yiddish represented and encompassed a culture and history of Ashkenazi Jews going back centuries in Europe, a history that is overlooked by focusing on Hebrew as a national Jewish language:

The State of Israel, we were told, was the home of the Jewish people and Europe was a continent sized graveyard ... In Yiddish class I acquainted myself with a Jewishness that didn't erase my family and my history, but brought all of it, and more, into sharp focus.¹²

For Kafrissen and many other Ashkenazi Jews, Yiddish is the bridge that connects their present life in the United States to their roots in Europe.

¹². Rokhl Kafrissen, "Why Yiddish Matter," *The Forward*, May 8, 2012, sec. The Schmooze.

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Under the influence of Zionist discourse, Yiddish came to be viewed as the language of the lower class, uncultured, traditional Jew. The associations that were being made between Yiddish and “lower-class” stemmed from an organized campaign to modernize the Jew, move away from associations with the traditional past, reclaim roots in the biblical ancient past and the “holy land”, and unify the Jewish people through the Hebrew language led by prominent Zionists. Hebrew was not the only language fighting for dominance by prominent Jewish political organizations. In support of Yiddish, and in contrast to the Zionists, the Bund, the Jewish socialist movement dominant in Poland and Russia during the mid-twentieth century saw Yiddish as the language of Jews. The Bund sponsored Yiddish-speaking schools and other cultural welfare programs.¹³ The universality of Yiddish being spoken in homes made it more accessible in the Bund’s eyes than Hebrew, the language of the elites. Before Hebrew was declared the official language of the State of Israel, it was, like most of the other languages associated with Judaism, only spoken by small pockets of Jews globally. Hebrew was considered the language of the elite; it was primarily known by those who had the opportunity to study the language or to devote their lives to the study of Jewish scriptures.

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Zionist movement could now actualize its vision of what it meant to be Jewish. The Zionists claimed that control over a Jewish state was the only guarantee against the threat of extermination, and thus a secular movement had now acquired the power to shape how Jews understood their own past, their tradition, and their sense of self: “Israel, created in the wake of the Holocaust was to occupy a

¹³. Barry Davis, “Yiddish and the Jewish Identity,” *History Workshop* 23 (Spring 1987): 159–64.

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central place in the forging of the post-war Jewish identity, regardless of the degree of identification with it of the individual Jew.”¹⁴ By defining itself as the nation-state for all Jews through the “right of return,” Israel and the Zionist movement effectively defined the terms on which ideas of Jewishness are articulated and debated by Jews regardless of their citizenship status, their religious orientation, or their affinity for or against Zionism. With this claim over global Jewry, Jews in the diaspora are linked to the State of Israel whether they chose to be or not. When Hebrew was established as a national language of Israel, it had the effect of making concrete the Zionist claim that modern Israel was continuous with the ancient past and marginalizing the more recent histories of living diaspora. Languages such as Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Berber, and Yiddish, which were carriers of this more proximate and living histories and memories and of ways of being Jewish, were denigrated.

The Israeli government’s promotion of Hebrew came at the expense of other languages spoken by Jews who migrated to Israel after the Holocaust. The large majority were Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern and Central Europe where they had been targets of Nazi violence. In Zionist discourse, Yiddish was associated with blind traditionalism and with weakness: “Yiddish and the European Jew came to denote weakness, passivity, ‘going like sheep to the slaughter’; the very opposite of the new, tanned, ‘strong’ Hebrew-speaking Jew. Ben-Gurion himself a Yiddish-speaker, declared that Yiddish ‘grated’ on his ears.”¹⁵ It is ironic that the attitude of the first prime minister of the State of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, towards Yiddish and his preference for Hebrew mirrored the attitude of many European anti-Semites. The scholar Bruce Mitchell notes

¹⁴. Ibid., 161.

¹⁵. Helen Beer, “Yiddish Without Yiddish?,” *European Judaism* 42, no. 2 (Autumn 2009): 14.

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that the early Zionism movement began associating Yiddish, both the language and culture, with the “religious ghetto Jew.”¹⁶ In contrast, the Zionist movement was promoting Hebrew amongst the Jews settling in Palestine before 1948. Assimilation into an emerging Israeli national culture came with the expectation that the very people whose survival was used as a justification for the Zionist project would need to prioritize Hebrew over their Yiddish inheritance. Although the circumstances were very different, Yiddish-speaking Jews who had migrated to the United States faced the pressures of assimilation into a predominantly English-speaking Protestant society that were compounded by an increasingly powerful Zionist movement that privileged Hebrew education.

V. Yiddish Within and Outside of Orthodox Communities in the United States

Education efforts for Yiddish looked different depending on the Jewish communities that were teaching the language. For Ashkenazi Jews immigrating prior to World War II, Yiddish was situated in the history and memory of the Haskalah and conversations of worth and importance in relation to Hebrew. After World War II, the importance of passing on Yiddish to future generations took on new meaning and a new sense of urgency, especially amongst the Hasidic community. According to Jefferey Shandler,

teaching Yiddish to their American-born children was part of the immigrants' efforts to forge new understandings of Yiddish as an object of cultural heritage, articulating

¹⁶. Bruce Mitchell, “Yiddish and the Hebrew Revival: A New Look at the Changing Role of Yiddish,” *Monatshefte* 90, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 192.

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connections between the immigrants' Old World past and their visions for the future of Jewish life in America.¹⁷

Yiddish, just like halachic customs and traditions, became a way for the orthodox Hasidic Jewish communities to create their own in-group in their new home. This way they could maintain the ways of the past in the modern era without compromising on living by Jewish law. Hasidic Jews took it upon themselves to restore the population of Jews that was lost during the Holocaust and sought ways to prosper and multiply in their new homes. The Hasidic groups were not the only ones within the Jewish tradition trying to address fears of the loss of Yiddish culture and heritage. Although they differed significantly in their ideas of the meaning of tradition and the role of Yiddish in the transmission of that tradition, secular and reform Ashkenazi Jews were all grappling with keeping the language alive.

The “secular Yiddish” spoken by these Ashkenazi communities adapted to its new context, much like the new individual Ashkenazi immigrant Jew. As it was not kept from adapting to its new environment unlike the Yiddish being spoken within Hasidic communities, secular Yiddish adapted to English, with choice vocabulary words added to the Jewish-English vernacular. “Hasidic Yiddish” secluded itself amongst the members of the Hasidic community and stylized select English words to Yiddish as the community saw fit. Dovid Katz saw this divide and noted that “there is virtually no contact between the writers and teachers of Yiddish in the secular and Hasidic communities, which are separated by a cultural ‘iron curtain’.”¹⁸

¹⁷. Jeffrey Shandler, “Beyond the Mother Tongue: Learning the Meaning of Yiddish in America,” *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, 6, no. 3 (Spring-Summer 2000): 97-123.

¹⁸. Dovid Katz, “Men baraykhert dos yidish bay khsidishe kinderlekh,” *Forverts*, (April 17, 1998):15, quoted in Jeffrey Shandler, “Beyond the Mother Tongue.”

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According to Shandler, the divide in ideology between orthodox and non-orthodox methods of maintaining Yiddish speaks more to the multitude of methods that exist to preserve a culture under historical and societal pressures.

Shandler goes on to quote Lowenthal on his observation that the divide between secular and orthodox Judaism in their approach to the continuation of the Yiddish language “reflects not just habit but conscious choice.” As Shandler puts it,

for postwar American Hasidim as much as for prewar East European Jewish immigrants, Yiddish is transvalued as heritage, ... despite the obvious differences between these two communities' notions of the symbolic meaning of the language, neither can assume that Yiddish will remain *di shprakh vos redt zikh*.¹⁹

Shandler’s translation of the Yiddish phrase is that for Yiddish, supposedly there is no need for teaching the language as it is a language that *di shprakh vos redt zikh* (“speaks for itself”). Yiddish has tried to survive through many diminishing events: the criticism of the Jewish Enlightenment, the loss of most of its speakers during the Holocaust, and the divisions and debates between Hasidic and non-Hasidic Jews over its future. Zionism’s choice of Hebrew had the effect of undermining the centrality of Yiddish to the lives of Ashkenazi Jews and leading to its decline.

Informal teaching of Yiddish for the less religious Jews served as an important touchstone for the continued survival of Ashkenazi Jewish culture. In the early part of the twentieth century, women’s circles served as a space for maintaining and transmitting Yiddish. Women got together to speak to each other, exchange stories, and read and exchange Yiddish

¹⁹. Shandler, “Beyond the Mother Tongue.”

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books. From the 1920s onwards these clubs were meant to promote Yiddish culture through their affiliations with Yiddish schools, pro-Yiddish political parties, and Yiddish cultural organizations. Besides the preservation and promotion of Yiddish literature, these reading clubs served as a stopgap against the growing pressures of assimilation into the mainstream of American society. As Hagit Cohen observes, “the emergence of the Yiddish reading groups and their activities should be viewed as an expression of the coalescence of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant community and of the transformation of Yiddish culture into a secular culture.”²⁰ These reading clubs also served to push back against the legacy of the Jewish Haskalah which had propagated negative views of Yiddish as a symbol of Jewish backwardness. In an important article, Naomi Seidman has argued that the criticisms of the Yiddish language and culture are also gendered:

Yiddish was identified with the female realm, while Hebrew was identified with “male” erudition. ... Yiddish loyalists challenged the hierarchical relations between the two languages, embodied in the representation of Hebrew as the “mistress” and Yiddish as the “servant woman.” The inferiority of the “servant” was presented by her faithful as institutional rather than cultural. The Yiddishists, stressing their connection to the common people, identified Yiddish with the Jewish working class, while Hebrew was identified with bourgeois elites.²¹

Despite the role of these reading circles in fostering fresh growth in using the modern Yiddish language, they could not compete with the resources of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel in promoting modern Hebrew. Cohen describes the reading circles as “doomed to

²⁰. Hagit Cohen, “The Demands of Integration-The Challenge of Ethnicization: Jewish Women’s Yiddish Reading Circles in North America Between the Two World Wars,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 16 (Fall 2008): 103.

²¹. *Ibid.*, 119.

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failure.”²² In the second half of the twentieth century, secular public schools were the most accessible means available to Ashkenazi immigrants for educating their children. Most times, “when second-generation Jews struggled to institute the study of a Jewish language in the New York public schools, they had Hebrew in mind, not Yiddish.”²³ It should be noted that not all Ashkenazi Jews in the United States did not define themselves primarily in terms of their relationship to Zionism or the State of Israel. As a result, their feelings about the continuation of Yiddish or the growing importance of modern Hebrew varied. Individual Jews that did choose to assimilate themselves to the State of Israel by prioritizing Hebrew retained a connection to Yiddish by selectively using vocabulary, going to Yiddish plays, or reading Yiddish newspapers. Others may have clung to Yiddish as the central touchstone of their self-understanding as Ashkenazi Jews.

Yiddish dissemination was aided by cultural/social circles and through Yiddish newspapers. These international newspapers, some of which were the first of their kind for many of their readers, helped keep the language alive for readers domestically and abroad. Scholar Tony Michels notes that these international Yiddish newspapers were not exclusive to the Yiddish language. The selection of languages point towards a collection of Central and Eastern European Jews who did not speak a common mother-tongue but did all speak Yiddish. This goes to show that while not bound by a past shared national language, Ashkenazi Jews who had immigrated to the United States could still come together over Yiddish.

Socialist intellectuals often moved between Yiddish, English, German, and Russian. Hebrew was almost never chosen, even by those who could write well in the language...

²². Ibid., 123.

²³. Ibid., 123.

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The decision to write in Yiddish did not necessarily lead to an embrace of Yiddishist or cultural nationalist ideologies.²⁴

This connection to the Yiddish culture and language found in the early twentieth century newspapers continue to the present day. The Forward or *Forverts* is still published in both Yiddish and English. Simon J. Bronner sought out Yiddish communities in the present day outside of exclusive Yiddish-speaking orthodox communities to learn about their ongoing attachments to Yiddish. He found many communities across the United States with a continued attachment to both the Yiddish language and culture.

Yiddish is often referred to as a language without a nation, but for most of the *vinkln* members interviewed, the language raised a mental map of Jewish Eastern Europe with Poland at its center. This image frequently comes with self-doubt, since Yiddish connoted to interviewees the language of the Holocaust, an irrecoverable and undesirable past. Others expressed ambivalence about Yiddish because of its contemporary association with the Hasidim, who many connected with Jewish passivity and communal control during the Holocaust. They commonly explained their fidelity to Yiddish by referring to its special expressiveness rather than saying it was the language of their childhood.²⁵

For these people that Bronner spoke with, a common thread amongst them was their relationship to the Yiddish language. Through their childhood Yiddish language acquisition was not encouraged. Their relationship with the Yiddish language and culture and their own history with their ancestors was rooted in their European Jewry. The connotations Yiddish has with the painful history of the Holocaust are a recent construction, one that overlooks the long traditions and history in which Yiddish served as the lingua franca for Jewish communities for generations.

²⁴. Tony Michels, “‘Speaking to Moyshe’: The Early Socialist Yiddish Press and Its Readers,” *Jewish History* 14, no. 1 (2000): 68.

²⁵. Simon J. Bronner, “From Landsmanschaften to Vinkln: Mediating Community among Yiddish Speakers in America,” *Jewish History* 15, no. 2 (2001): 140.

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Historically, schools have served many functions in the maintenance of Ashkenazi Jewish culture and language. For instance, Jewish schools in the newly formed Polish state were divided along ideological lines in this very matter. As the second-largest non-Polish group in the country, Jews were denied the freedoms and rights of other Polish citizens. The Polish political response rejected outright the idea of Jewish autonomy, with left wing parties supporting Jewish assimilation and right-wing parties rejecting Jews as part of the Polish people because of their religious and ethnic origin. Polish politics were polarized by ideology and nationality, and Polish Jews reflected the political spectrum, identifying as Orthodox, secular Yiddishists, or Zionists, with many specialized parties based on fine ideological distinctions. The Orthodox community adopted the position of the Neo-Orthodox German Agudat Yisrael and entered the political arena as opponents of Zionism. A crucial battleground for these political rivalries was the field of education. Different parties created independent educational systems: the Zionist factions had Tarbut, the Bund had the “central Yiddish schools in the Polish Republic,” and the religious Zionists had Yavne. The non-Zionist Orthodox had independent schools and the Polish government funded schools that were identical to other state funded schools but did not operate on the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. There were also schools with a double curriculum: Hebrew for Jewish subjects and Polish for general education. These schools catered to Zionist parents interested in the social mobility official Polish education gave. There was even a network of schools that offered Yiddish as the main language of instruction but taught Hebrew as a second language, accommodating parents connected to the Poaley Tziyon party, which was socialist, but who were not opposed to Hebrew.²⁶

With this deeply embedded drive to provide their children with Jewish education and with a connection to a new nation (Poland), the link between ideas of Jewishness and Yiddish education is significant. As Laura Levitt puts it “Eastern European Jewish immigrants brought with them a mixture of pride, shame, nostalgia, and joy in the Yiddish culture and politics they left behind.”²⁷ The centrality of Yiddish in the self-conception of Ashkenazi Jews came to the forefront at the *Tshernovits* (Czernowitz) Language Conference of 1908. Many of the tensions that emerged in

²⁶. Ibid., 363.

²⁷. Laura Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 816.

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the discussions at the conference were echoed in later debates about Yiddish versus Hebrew. During this international conference, several scholars and advocates argued for the centrality of Yiddish in Jewish life and some argued that Yiddish be declared the national language of the Jews. “Yiddish thereby gained official recognition as a unifying linguistic expression of Jewishness, a role which the most militant Zionists were only willing to assign to Modern Hebrew.”²⁸

In the United States, efforts to keep Yiddish alive were successful for a time. For example, many non-orthodox Jewish families that congregated on the Lower East Side of New York kept alive a vibrant Yiddish culture: “In addition to reading Yiddish newspapers, ...they went to the Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side of New York City and sought out traveling Yiddish theatrical productions as they played in smaller venues across the country.” Growing up in the shadows of the Holocaust, she found herself a part of yet another community that was dying... It is only much later as an adult that she came to understand that the U.S. Yiddish-speaking world in which she was raised no longer exists...She believes there is a place for a kind of broken Yiddish culture, a secular Yiddish culture for those who no longer speak the language of their ancestors but who bring other things to this cultural legacy.²⁹

Klepfisz’s account highlights the generational loss that occurred when Hebrew won over Yiddish as the language of the Jews in a hopeful, yet diminished way.

Yiddish holds a different significance for members of the Orthodox Jewish community than it does for secular or non-orthodox Jews. The orthodox movement began in Europe in the eighteenth century. Within Orthodox Judaism there are several branches that focus on different values, each placing a slightly distinct emphasis on the study of the *Torah*, connection and

²⁸. Mitchell, “Yiddish and the Hebrew Revival,”

²⁹. Ibid., 818.

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adherence to religious laws, and different ways of living in a rapidly modernizing and secularizing world. One such Orthodox group, the Hasidic Jews are an insular community:

The Hasidic movement (Hasid ‘pious one; Hasidim, ‘pious ones’) originated in Eastern Europe in the mid 18th century... By the close of World War II, the majority of Hasidim had been killed in the holocaust... The Holocaust provided Hassidim with a mission of reconstruction which made it their responsibility to rebuild and repopulate all that was lost.³⁰

Having settled in the newly formed State of Israel and in the United States (largely in New York City), Hasidic Jews began rebuilding their community similarly to the ways of the past.

In a recent in-depth study of the Hasidic Jews of Brooklyn, Ayla Fader discusses their use of Yiddish. Fader writes that “community members used the term “Hasidic Yiddish” to refer to both their particular dialect of Yiddish and to their incorporation of the English lexicon into Yiddish.”³¹ This dialect of Yiddish speaks to the insular nature of the community, having developed separately from the other Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews that migrated from Central and Eastern Europe. Fader writes that for Ashkenazi Jews “in pre-war Eastern Europe traditional Jewish communities were “triglossic.” The written language for sacred learning was *loshn koydesh* (Hebrew and Aramaic). The vernaculars, written and spoken, were Yiddish, and a co-territorial language.”³² The ideological divide between Hasidic Orthodox Jews immigrating post World War II and other Ashkenazi Jews created the barrier between the two communities. For the Hasidic Jews, the goal of repopulating and of maintaining community bonds depends on

³⁰. Ayala Fader, “Reclaiming Sacred Sparks: Linguistic Syncretism and Gendered Language Shift among Hasidic Jews in New York,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (June 2007): 4.

³¹. *Ibid.*, 6.

³². *Ibid.*, 1.

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adherence to traditions and the practices, but also on the retention of the languages they have inherited from Europe. Writing in the Yiddish language magazine *Maylos*, the editor responds to a complaint that there were too many non-authentic Yiddish words:

We must not forget that the goal of the Yiddish language is to separate us from the gentiles. If English, English sounding-words become more than the Yiddish ones, then it will not take too long until Yiddish is completely forgotten. If some English words come into Yiddish, but they sound Yiddish, that shouldn't 'bother' anybody. The mother-tongue is still very different from the Gentile one.³³

This separation and exclusion from both secular non-Hasidic and non-Jewish life are quite different from the effort to maintain Yiddish in non-orthodox circles. The in-grouping and seclusion mentality that was created by Hasidic communities in the United States post World War II are highlighted quite well by this response. The editor's defense of the new hybrid Yiddish highlights the problem of the Zionist claim that the only way to be modern and Jewish is by embracing Hebrew. The editor's acceptance of modernization is a direct affront to Zionism's views of Yiddish's backwardness and inability to modernize.

With this mindset of integration and modernization, Yiddish maintained its place in social and political debates. Historian Jefferey Shandler coined the term, 'Yiddishland' to refer to "those who wish to maintain ties to Yiddish in spite of the destruction of its Eastern and Central European speakers [and] do so by creating an imaginary linguistic community."³⁴ Throughout history Yiddish has been a language associated with marginality and the transient condition of the archetypical Wandering Jew, yet in its post-vernacular mode, Yiddish finally has

³³. Ibid., 8.

³⁴. Jefferey Shandler, "Imagining Yiddishland: Language, Place and Memory," *History & Memory* 15, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 123–49.

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found a resting place in the imagination of a host of Jews bent on resuscitating the language and world of their antecedents. Fader goes on to say that “in contrast to Israel - the other “imagined” homeland for the Jews - Yiddishland provides a space for secular diaspora Jews uncomfortable with grounding their Jewish identity on the land mapped out by the Zionist project in the Middle East.”³⁵ This “Yiddishland” locates the speakers of Yiddish away from both Europe and Israel. In it, Jewishness is not bound to territory or citizenship in a nation-state, but to ways of embodying Jewish ethical teachings. As I wrote about earlier, the establishment of the State of Israel was not an idea welcomed by all Jews. Fader posits that Ashkenazi Jews wish to envision a homeland that encompasses their history and culture without constructing a physical space to embody.

For non-orthodox Jews who grew up in the periphery of Yiddish-speaking communities, the connection to Yiddish was about maintaining tradition, and the bridge to ways of living in Europe before World War II. Examining why Yiddish still matters to her, the art critic Rokhl Kafrissen writes in the *Forvert* (The Forward):

When they find out I’m a Yiddishist, people often ask if I grew up in a Yiddish speaking home. The answer is no. My parents did not speak the language, although now and again they dropped a Yiddish word or phrase. But it was a long time before I connected those isolated words and phrases to an actual language.

At my Conservative Hebrew school *Shma* and *Hatikvah* were given equal weight. For good behavior we received Bazooka bubblegum with Hebrew jokes printed on the wrapper. No matter that not one of my classmates could understand the Hebrew. The State of Israel, we were told, was the home of the Jewish people and Europe was a continent sized graveyard. Modern (Israeli) Hebrew pronunciation was taught to us by a Polish Holocaust survivor. Little that we learned would help us function as adult Jews.

³⁵. Fader, “Reclaiming Sacred Sparks” 154.

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What we did learn didn't quite track with the lived Jewishness all of us, teachers and students, brought into the classroom.

That confusion drove me to seek out Yiddish wherever I could, most importantly, as an academic subject. In my first semester of college Yiddish I learned more about Jewishness than I had in years of Hebrew school. In Yiddish class I acquainted myself with a Jewishness that didn't erase my family and my history, but brought all of it, and more, into sharp focus.³⁶

For Kafrissen, and for many other Jews like her, Yiddish was always there but was not the sole connection to her Jewish roots like it may have been for those within the Hasidic community.

When I traveled to Europe in 2019, the Yiddish I encountered in Jewish communities (either of the past or new) told a story of vibrant communities that focused on life and not on the one historical event that ended their way of life in the region. Yiddish was mixed into their fabric of life. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a prominent Orthodox Talmudic scholar in America during the mid-twentieth century, switched the language of his class at Yeshiva University from Yiddish to English in 1960, when he saw how many of the students could not understand Yiddish.

Writing on this matter in an article for the *Forvert* (The Forward) Lawrence Grossman writes:

The next year [Soloveitchik] wrote a letter, appended to this book, suggesting that although Yiddish was not intrinsically holy, it maintained a degree of derivative holiness from its use as a language of Torah study and as the linguistic vehicle for ordinary Jews over the centuries to express their Jewish faith and loyalty.³⁷

³⁶. Kafrissen, "Why Yiddish Matter,"

³⁷. Lawrence Grossman, "When American Judaism Was Yiddish," *The Forward*, August 26, 2009, sec. Culture.

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The decline in Yiddish in the mid-twentieth century was a turning point for the language. Hasidic communities were able to maintain their hold on the Yiddish language from then on. The push for Hebrew became more of a foregone conclusion that Hebrew was the language of the Jews.

Amelia Glaser looked at the significance of Yiddish and the proposed future of the language in the twenty-first century. She quotes David Katz's *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* in which he claims:

As the secular revolution fades away by sheer demography, the Yiddish language is strengthened daily as the natural spoken language of the Hasidim, the prime component of the eternal religious Jewish “tree trunk” from which secular outbursts branch out from time to time (often centuries apart). It is the Hasidim, more than any other Ultraorthodox branch, who maintain their pre-Holocaust Jewish civilization intact through clothing, traditions, and Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism.³⁸

By privileging the role of the Hasidic community in keeping Yiddish alive, Katz and others diminish the importance of Yiddish for secular and non-orthodox Ashkenazi Jews.

Before World War II different sections of the Ashkenazi community in the United States sought to promote Yiddish so that they could nurture and transmit their traditions to their children. The cultural ties to Yiddish shifted after the war as families reevaluated their relationship with the language in face of the new histories of the Jewish community being presented to them. The educational materials for children to learn did not emphasize the centrality of Yiddish in an Ashkenazi Jewish culture rooted in Central and Eastern European. Nor did it inculcate *shtetl* values. In his study of Yiddish in American, Jeffery Shandler found

³⁸. Amelia Glaser, “From Polylingual to Postvernacular: Imagining Yiddish in the Twenty-First Century,” *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, 14, no. 3 (Spring-Summer 2008): 157.

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that “in the first “Socialist Sunday Schools,” established by a branch of the Workmen's Circle in 1906, children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants were given a left-wing political education in English. “Still cosmopolitan in their outlook, the founders of the school placed no emphasis on the Yiddish language or upon Jewish culture or national survival.”³⁹ These first Yiddish language instructional materials were often used at orthodox institutions, as part of the yeshivas’ efforts to include Yiddish language instruction in part with their Jewish history.

In one of the first American Yiddish primers for the Farband school, the introduction reads:

Above all, I hope that our "Moyshlekh and Shloymelekh," our younger generation, on whom we place all of our hopes, will be drawn through this book to something of their own, something *heykish* [intimate, familiar]; that they will find herein the voices of their people, of their past and present; that not only will this book acquaint them with the Yiddish language and foster a love of its literature, but that through it they will be filled with love for our people and its existence.⁴⁰

Rooting the existence of Yiddish and Jewish experience together in the past cements its place as a language of cultural history. By the 1950s, the Jews who were being taught Yiddish belonged to the third generation of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. This cultural divide posed a major problem for teachers who sought to bridge the connection for their students between the language and their heritage. Educator Khayem Bez wrote a book addressing this challenge, *Shprakh un dertsjung*. As Shandler notes, for Bez “forging such an attachment to Yiddish was vital to preventing these American Jewish children from feeling estranged from

³⁹. Shandler, “Beyond the Mother Tongue,” :103.

⁴⁰. *Ibid.*, 104.

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their own people.”⁴¹ Yiddish education was vital for preserving the language but for also maintaining ties to Yiddish political and socialist groups that supplied Yiddish educational materials. Yiddish education provided a lens into Jewish education and to Jewish history through a lens that was not exclusively Zionist and Hebrew-centric. For Yiddish education, the bridge to the old way of life could be maintained in a positive framing: exile from Europe did not have to be a forgone conclusion for Judaism and the State of Israel did not have to be the *only* future for the continuation of the Jewish tradition.

Hebrew education, on the other hand, did not decline like Yiddish did. The push to expand Hebrew education reached beyond yeshivas and Jewish day schools into American public schools in the second half of the twentieth century. A correlation was being formed between Hebrew and Judaism. To form a strong attachment to Jewish identity, maintain this attachment, and pass it on to the next generation, Hebrew was being promoted as the solution to being Jewish in the diaspora and in the modern world. Jonathan Krasner links the valorization of Hebrew education to the activities of Zionist organizations in America. He argues that “the impetus for the Hebrew language campaign came from the American Student Zionist Federation, known in Hebrew as *Avuka* (the Torch), which began pressing the issue in 1928.”⁴² Krasner details the history of the Zionist campaign for Hebrew education and quotes an activist named Samuel Margoshes:

⁴¹. Ibid., 109.

⁴². The quote is from Margoshes’ column in *Der Tog* (The Dog), a Zionist newspaper. in which Morgoshes writes: Jonathan Krasner, “The Limits of Cultural Zionism in America: The Case of Hebrew in the New York City Public Schools, 1930-1960,” *American Jewish History* 95, no. 4 (December 2009): 353.

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I cannot think of any better way in which the Jewish student in New York could identify himself with the Jewish group than by electing Hebrew as part of his high school or college program. There are, of course, some who prefer to forget their Jewishness, hoping thereby they will induce others to forget it, and they will reject Hebrew, but those who are aware of the sheer bankruptcy of this ostrich-like policy, and are desirous of proclaiming their affiliation with the Jewish people, will find in their Hebrew registration blank one of the most dignified forms of expressing their Jewish allegiance.⁴³

This perspective on Hebrew in relation to Jewish history worked in favor of those who supported Hebrew language education. Cementing Hebrew in the modern, progressive light with favor towards positive relations towards Judaism contrasted the push for Yiddish. Hebrew was being marketed as the Jewish language. It served to function as a unifying force between Jews, both in the State of Israel and abroad. Hebrew education aided in the unification of the modern Jew.

In contrast to Yiddish, Hebrew was presented as ‘a symbol of secular Jewish ethnicity compatible with Progressive Americanism,’ a portrayal that resonated with at least some school board members who were apparently anxious not to appear as reflexively antagonistic to Jewish concerns.⁴⁴

Hebrew education, Hebrew itself, offered a way forward for Jews to retain their cultural ties to Judaism and still assimilate themselves to the United States. Since for some Jews the schools were the most common and reliable location for their children to be receiving their Jewish education outside the homes, the willingness to align their political ideology with the masses and not become outliers in the Zionist campaign to modernize the Jew.

VII. Conclusion

⁴³. Ibid., 350.

⁴⁴. Ibid., 363.

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As the Zionist movement tries to be the sole representative of the global Jewry, Zionism is making a political claim for the connection a Jew must have with both the State of Israel and Judaism. To owe allegiance to the State of Israel means to also owe allegiance to both the state's and to the Zionist's definition of what it means to be Jewish. Israel to this day aligns Jewishness with Hebrew. On the Israeli government website there is a selection of the speech Ben-Gurion gave from the *Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel* in which he declares:

Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel) was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious, and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books... Jews strove in every successive generation to reestablish themselves in their ancient homeland. ... they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community, controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself.⁴⁵

It was no mistake that Hebrew is in this declaration. When Hebrew became the national language a religious and political claim was being made of how one defines being a Jew. Even though Yiddish had a much larger percentage of speakers over the other Jewish languages compared to Hebrew, Yiddish was still pushed down to a second-class status with the other global Jewish languages. When modern Hebrew was chosen as the Jewish language it showed little regard to the value the Yiddish language held for the large number of Yiddish speaking Ashkenazi Jews. The State of Israel adopting Hebrew as its national language made Yiddish no different from any other Jewish language.

⁴⁵. David Ben-Gurion, *Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel* (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1948).

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In the United States the decline of Yiddish is owed to the slow phase out of Yiddish in favor of Hebrew as a second language as part of the Zionist effort in less orthodox Jewish circles. Within the Hasidic community, Yiddish does not modernize fast enough to keep the language alive past the boundaries of the communities that still speak it because in order to keep a language vibrant and accessible, the passing of culture between the multiple Jewish communities in the United States would need to be fluid and not closed off. In an effort to push back against the Zionist ideology that roots a Jewish identity both in the State of Israel and with the use of modern Hebrew, a continuous effort to modernize Yiddish and keep the language and culture alive through a shared cross-cultural non-orthodox and orthodox Jewish experience would aid in the continuation of the Yiddish language.

The Zionist ideology in its efforts to establish a place of salvation for the then stateless Jew, weaponized their political message of the modern Jew in their “homeland” into a decades-long effort against the importance of the Yiddish language and an Ashkenazi Jewish identity grounded in Central and Eastern European values. Rewriting a narrative of Ashkenazi Jewry that belittled the history of the Ashkenazi Jew and took their cultural language as a sign of their weakness instead of as a sign of their strength and resilience against the centuries of anti-Semitic circumstances did not allow for a full and complete narrative that celebrated the history and religious advantages to being an Ashkenazi Jew. Zionism did not erase Yiddish, but it effectively marginalized Yiddish culture and Yiddish speakers in its society for its own benefit.

When you have such a large and diverse cultural group such as the Jewish people, there is no one way to define every individual. Members of a tradition each fit the category of Jew with different traits that they bring: genealogy, ritual, and culture to name a few. The Zionist

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movement's methodization and willingness to create their own in-group and out-group within their own people is a sign that their homogenous identity is a willingness to carefully edit the past and deny their own people bits of their culture and identity. Ashkenazi Jews without Yiddish are still Jews, but are Jews missing a vibrant and crucial part of their own narrative.

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