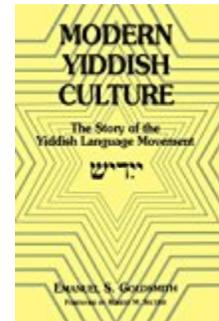




Emanuel Goldsmith. *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997. 321 pp. \$17.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-1695-6.

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Yiddish and Yiddishism: A Jewish Nationalist Ideology

In 1908, seventy people gathered in the Austro-Hungarian city of Czernowitz, Bukovina at a conference proclaiming Yiddish a modern language with a developing high culture. The organizers, who occupy much of Emanuel Goldsmith's book, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, expressed a sense of urgency to the delegates at the conference that Yiddish as a language and as the binding glue of Jews throughout Eastern Europe needed help: "People are still ashamed of [the Yiddish language]. If this be true, a stop must be put to these things. A fence needs be established, some sort of protection for our precious mother-tongue so that it does not wander about aimlessly as until now, so that it does not become chaotic, tattered and divided." And as the speakers at the conference reiterated, the status of Yiddish reflected the status of the Jewish people. Thus only by saving the language could the Jews as a people be saved from the onslaught of assimilation.

Goldsmith, a professor and rabbi, spends the first three chapters of the book setting the scene for this ideology, known as Yiddishism or the Yiddish language movement. He gives a brief history of the politics surrounding the language, focusing on the mid-nineteenth century when, for the first time, Jewish writers and intellectuals used Yiddish as a modern, literary language. This group of young "modernized" writers, known as maskilim ("Enlighteners"), turned to Yiddish as a means of spreading haskalah ideology to as wide an audience as possible. There was certainly no love of Yiddish among most maskilic writers, for whom Yiddish was a means to an end—the raising up of the Jewish masses to a higher

cultural standard. Nonetheless, these writers sowed the seeds for a modern Yiddish literature and introduced the concept of publishing Jewish literature for a mass Jewish audience. Goldsmith then turns to socialism and nationalism, popular movements which spread Yiddish literature and Yiddish culture throughout Eastern Europe and throughout the world. As such populist ideologies spread, the "Jewish masses" and their language, Yiddish, took center stage. By the turn of the century, Yiddish was seen as more than the bumbling jargon of the ignorant masses, but as a language unto itself bearing the unique stamp of the Jewish people.

With this foundation, Goldsmith then tells the story of the rise and fall of Yiddishism. He traces the biographies of four central figures in Yiddishism—Natan Birnbaum, Y.L. Peretz, Matisyohu Miseses, and Chaim Zhitlovsky—and then describes the 1908 Czernowitz Conference, the moment when the movement known as Yiddishism crystallized. What binds these four men's ideas together into an ideology? Although Goldsmith never spells it out overtly, as the book is more descriptive than analytic, Yiddishism can be defined as a romantic nationalist ideology in which Yiddish reflects the Jewish spirit—a concept taken from early nineteenth century German romantics. Language was a means of both binding the nation and staving off the natural tendencies of assimilation into the host culture. According to this ideology, Yiddish was a "poor" language for expressing high concepts, because the maskilim had viewed Yiddish as a means, not as an end. Yiddishism turned that equation on its head; Yiddish was the end—the preservation

of the Jewish people. To achieve this, Yiddish needed to be standardized and used by intellectuals so that it could develop a high literary culture that would enrich the language. At the same time, Yiddishists realized that such an endeavor needed the social support of a mass Yiddish speaking/reading base, and thus they wanted to establish Yiddish-language institutions in autonomous territories. In other words, Yiddish would become the language of, to use the words of Benjamin Harshav, a secular poly-system, in which a high literary culture cultivates a language while an institutional network establishes a social base and a mass of speakers of that language.

If there was a core of intellectuals dedicated to making Yiddish the language of a secular poly-system, why did Yiddishism fail to achieve in Eastern Europe what Hebraism did successfully in Palestine? The failures, in fact, were clear at the Czernowitz conference itself: religious Jews found the movement too secular; Bundists, too nationalistic and lacking in class content; and most staunch Jewish nationalists became Zionists and, in general, Hebraists. Yiddishism, then, fell between socialism and nationalism. Later, the social base of Yiddishism began shrinking as the Jewish working class rose in economic and social status in Eastern Europe, leading to linguistic assimilation. Most devastatingly, though, the Holocaust wiped out the entire social base and high cultural elite for Yiddish in Eastern Europe.

To all of these historical explanations, Goldsmith adds a new chapter for the third edition, which gives

his own interpretation of the failure of Yiddishism which cannot be attributed to external social forces alone. Goldsmith argues that the ideology of Yiddishism was bankrupt from the beginning, because, in his estimation, language alone cannot unify the Jewish people. Goldsmith takes this argument further. In his words, "The secularism of the Yiddishists was, for the most part, a dogmatic illusion which detached them from the deepest emotions of Jewry and robbed them of the sustaining power of the religious regimen and religious symbolism." In other words, without religion, or at least religious symbolism, no Jewish ideology can succeed in uniting Jews. His argument, however, does not explain why Zionism, for example, succeeded where Yiddishism failed, even though both movements faced a similar criticism. Goldsmith makes no claims to objectivity in this final chapter, but his rant against secularism seems very out of place in an otherwise academic description of the political, social, and cultural challenges facing those who wanted Yiddish to become the national Jewish language. Ironically, Hebrew became the secular, national language of the Jews, and Yiddish flourishes today in the most non-secular of Jewish spheres—the Hasidic world. Perhaps Goldsmith can look to those communities in New York and Jerusalem as ones who have fused Yiddish and religion successfully in today's world.

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