

BOOKS

Yiddish for the *Landsman*

BY MINDY SCHILLER

Special to the *World Jewish Digest*

Have you ever noticed the titles of most books about Yiddish? For instance, here's what a quick Amazon.com search will get you: "The Book of Yiddish Insults and Curses," "Drekl!: The Real Yiddish Your Bubbe Never Taught You," "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Learning Yiddish."

And, of course, there's my personal favorite: "Yiddish for Dogs: Chutzpah, Feh! Kibbitz, and More: Every Word Your Canine Needs to Know." When was the last time you saw a book on the *French* your canine needs to know? I mean, why don't they just call it "Toilet Talk: A Primer" and be done with it?

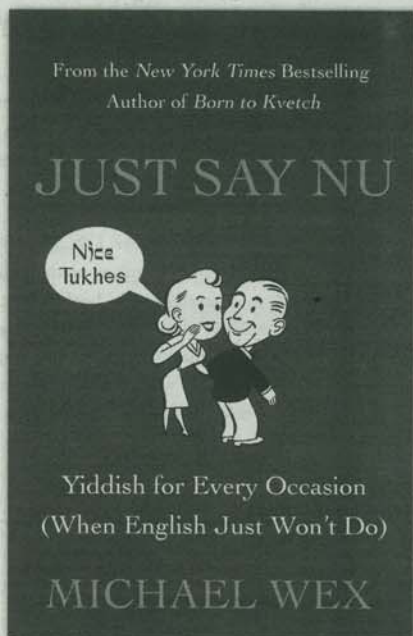
The canon of titles all have something in common—aside from being offensive, that is. They all treat Yiddish like a relic—a cutesy jargon that can be sliced, diced, fragmented beyond repair and repackaged for any commercial occasion. In short: they're all condescending. That's why, when a new Yiddish book hits the market and threatens to join that canon, I can't help but cringe.

Michael Wex is the exception to this rule. In 2005, Wex, a writer and performer, published "Born to Kvetch," a humorous—some would say hilarious—investigation of the Yiddish language. Not interested in nostalgia, Wex's book treated Yiddish with *kavod* (respect), revealing for novices the delicious subtlety

Now Wex is back with a sequel, "Just Say Nu" (October 2007, St. Martin's Press), which picks up where "Kvetch" left off. The book's mission is clear from its subtitle: "Yiddish for Every Occasion (When English Just Won't Do)." It suggests that the reader is learning Yiddish not because he wants to make silly jokes or decode his grandparents' hushed whispers, but because English just can't articulate what it is he wants to say. In other words: because Yiddish might actually say it better.

Wex's introduction is the second clue that his book is different. At the risk of alienating his audience, Wex opens his tale in a sound-editing room 10 years ago, where he is recording—in Yiddish—the dialogue for the kind of movie that goes unmentioned in family magazines. The guest star of this skin flick? A rabbi.

Wex is taking a risk all right, but it's one that speaks volumes. In essence, he's saying, the audience of this book is *not*



**"JUST SAY NU: YIDDISH FOR EVERY OCCASION
(WHEN ENGLISH JUST WON'T DO)"**

By Michael Wex
St. Martin's Press, 2007
320 pages

The Yiddish of this book is earthy and usable—it belongs in neither the *beis midrash* nor the Lox and Bagels Luncheon.

Which is pretty refreshing. In an Ama-

zon list where Yiddish is reduced to swear words, curses and schmaltzy jokes, where someone who uses the words "yente" and "schmuck" is a self-proclaimed Yiddish expert, Michael Wex shows both appre-

ciation for and understanding of Yiddish. He treats it like a real language. So what is this book? It transcends genre. It is a manual of sorts, a pseudo-textbook on usable Yiddish, but no one would make the mistake of calling it Yiddish 101. You won't find a single chapter on grammar. Nor will you find one on sentence structure. What you *will* find are nine belly-laugh chapters on how to use that grammar or sentence structure to your advantage. (In the words of my bubbe, this book is *geshmak*—it has flavor.) Wex has chapters on every type of usage imaginable, from meeting an aunt to getting a physical to making out in your girlfriend's den. Whether he really believes a modern-day teenager is going to speak Yiddish to his girlfriend is debatable. The point is that this book gives you every reason to think so.

Wex's examples are funny because they're anachronistic. For instance, to illustrate the word *makhitonim*—a concept that doesn't exist in English but which means the parents of your son-in-law or daughter-in-law—he uses the sentence (emphasis added by Wex): "IKH HOB GEHERT AS TIME-WARNER IN AOL ZENEN SHOYN OYS makhiTONim." "I heard that Time-Warner and AOL have parted company [literally: they are no longer makhitonim]." He writes as though there's a sudden mass of Yiddish speakers at cocktail parties and they're all discussing mergers of mega corporations.

Another feature that separates Wex's book from the *drek* is that he explains words in context, offering a sense of their cultural—not just literal—meaning. For instance, in his chapter on "protective phrases"—because in Yiddish, there actually *is* such a genre—he discusses the concept of the Evil Eye, the *ayin harah* or *bayez oyg*.

"According to the Talmud," he says, "a

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and ingenuity of the Yiddish language. Moreover, "Born to Kvetch" represented a departure from the genre of titles that kitsch-ified Yiddish, ultimately become a *New York Times* bestseller.

merely 85 or older. They're young, they know a thing or two about sex and—here's the kicker—they might actually be reading this because they think there's something worthwhile inside.

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NONE TOO BRIGHT

Yiddish is blessed with a wealth of expressions to describe anybody less intelligent than the speaker. Some of the best are:

ER VAYST NISHT FIN DI HENT MIT DEE FEES

*He doesn't know his hands or his feet;
he doesn't know [...] from shinola*

ZEE HOT AZOY FEEL SAYKHL VEE

*IN KLOYster meZizes
She has as many brains as a
church has mezuzahs*

SEH FELT EER MAIBL IN BOYDEM-SHTEEBL

She's got no furniture in her attic

KHOTSCH NEM IN MELK IM

*You might as well milk him, i.e., he's a
beHAYmeh—a cow, a beast, an idiot*

From "Just say Nu," by Michael Wex. Copyright © 2007
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tin's Press.

human being envies everybody except for his children and his students—and we're not always sure about them. For the rest, Jewish tradition tends toward unblinkered acceptance of the fact that deep down, where we think that no one can divine our secret thoughts, 99.9 percent of us are rank pieces of [...] with no more regard for others than the average stoat." Then, of course, he proceeds to illustrate with an example phrase: "*boDEI ZAKH AYN OYG, aBEE YAlnem TSVAY*." "I'd gladly lose one eye, just as long as you lose two."

What makes this book both hilarious and on target is that any Yiddish speaker knows such a statement could just as easily come from a sweet person as from a crotchety one. Yiddish is, after all, the language of a people persecuted for much of their existence. Can they help it if their humor is a little mordant?

By providing the context for all of the words he features, Wex also gives the reader an intense look at Jewish culture itself—because Yiddish, unlike English, which is spoken by billions of diverse types all over the world, is so very indicative of the people who speak it. For example, one way to ask someone to share an alcoholic drink is to say "*LOmer MAKHN SHAKL*," "Let us make [the blessing of *Shehakol*—literally, 'everything']. Yiddish takes it for granted that its speakers will understand, as a matter of course, that the blessing of *Shehakol* *n'h'yeh bidvaro*, which is made when the food item fits into none of the other designated categories, is a euphemism for the best food item of all: booze. It's a ridiculously convoluted example like that—and be-

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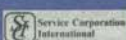


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ARTS & CULTURE

Schiller

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lieve me, none are any easier to explain—that indicates just how deeply the religion has permeated the language. Another outrageous example? *Asher YUTzer PaPEER*. Literally: the paper of “*Asher Yatzar*” (“He Who Has Created”), which refers to the *Asher Yatzar* blessing said after relieving oneself.

Or, in the vernacular: toilet paper.

That's the thing about Yiddish—and Wex conveys this more articulately than I thought possible—it's all about suggestion. In a culture where speech is prized above everything—where, as Proverbs say, “life and death are in the hands of the tongue”—saying something out loud gives it form or legitimacy. So, rather than do that, Yiddish will hint at something with a euphemism. In fact, growing up, I thought the Yiddish term for “cancer” was “*yena machla*.” Turns out it is—one of them, at least. But, literally translated, “*yena mechla*” means “that other illness.” The “other illness” we don't talk about because saying its name makes it real.

Paradoxically, in Yiddish, no topic is out of bounds. In fact, this could, quite possibly, be the most irreverent and down-to-earth language on the planet. (Wex offers a sidebar on 13 different ways to say “rear end.”) But everything is said in euphemism—no explicitness at all. That, of course, would be vulgar.

There is a downside to Wex's setting every word or expression in context, though. In true Talmudic form, he has organized the book according to the principle of “which reminds me.” In other words, there is a discussion on “empty threats” in a chapter called “Stages of Life” and a Yiddish-ized version of Donna Summer's *Hot Stuff* in a chapter called “Food and Drink.” Not to worry, though; just as with the Talmud, if you're patient enough and follow all the tangents to their logical conclusion, you'll end up right back at the beginning where you started.

Wex should know. Born in Lethbridge, Alberta, Wex, who is now in his mid-50's, is the last member of a rabbinic dynasty tracing back to the Polish cities of

Ciechanow and Strykow. Raised in a Yiddish-speaking family, he studied medieval languages at the University of Toronto and worked as a stand-up act in comedy clubs. Since then he's become a novelist, playwright, lecturer and performer whose specialty, and occasional medium, is Yiddish.

Wex's background shows: he takes the time to pronounce words consistently, explaining his pronunciation choices and how to understand them. (For more on the why's and wherefore's of Yiddish pronunciation, check out his treatise in “Born to Kvetch” on what he considers to be ivory-tower YIVO Yiddish, versus authentic *Poylish* Yiddish. There isn't a more gratifying page of text in the world for those partial to Polish Yiddish.) But, for all of Wex's command of the language, this book will never be found on a university course syllabus. If anything, it says “I want out of the academy.”

Wex tells an old joke about two Jews who meet after not having seen each other for a long time. They have much to say to each other, but in true Yiddish fashion, they manage to say it all by innuendo. (Anything more explicit might tempt the Evil Eye.)

'Nu?' says the first one.

The second says, 'E-e-h.'

'Ah!' says the first one.

The second goes 'Mmmm.'

'Oh,' nods the first.

'Ah-ha,' says the second. 'S'iz azoy git zakh arooptseraidn fin hartsn. 'It's so good to get it off my chest.'

There's a lot of bittersweet humor in this book—laughing out loud followed by sighing a deep “oy.” The man is damn funny. But, as they say, he has what to work with. After all, as Wex says, “Yiddish has the unique ability to diminish human misery without providing any concomitant increase in happiness.”

If a language can do that, it deserves at least a laugh or two. **WJD**

Mindy Schiller is the associate editor of World Jewish Digest.

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