

# A YIDDISH HARVEST: LIFE ON YIDDISH FARM

by SHULEM DEEN

“If language is just for communication, why do you need a thousand languages?”

“How do you make Yiddish sexy?” I asked Naftali Ejdelman, Education Director of Yiddish Farm, a 225-acre property in New Hampton, N.Y.

On my mind was the popular stereotype of the language as spoken mostly by octogenarians and Hasidic Jews.

“It already is,” Ejdelman said. He pointed to the group of young people around the table with us. “People who study Yiddish are the hippest people around.”

“Hip” is perhaps subjective, but the dozen or so college students there for a ten-day, full-immersion program in Yiddish and farming fit my own definition for hip — young, bookish and earnestly idealistic.

I was visiting Yiddish Farm after several years of a mild itch to learn more about the place. Founded in 2013 by Naftali Ejdelman and Yisroel Bass, Yiddish Farm was established for growing organic wheat and garlic, raising farm animals — goats, sheep, chickens — and for conducting day-to-day affairs in one of the most improbable languages for modern-day farming: Yiddish.

I had known the founders for several years and have my own abiding love for Yiddish, and yet, the farm’s precise purpose eluded me: it seemed so quixotic, so *random* — Yiddish, on a *farm*? In 2015?

**Shulem Deen** is the author of *All Who Go Do Not Return*, a memoir about his life in the Hasidic world. He is a columnist at *Forward*, and his work has appeared in *The New Republic*, *Salon*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Tablet* and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn.



“All visitors must bring beer,” Ejdelman had emailed me before I came. “It’s a *minhag kadmoynim*,” a custom of the ancients. And so I dutifully arrived with a six-pack of Samuel Adams and followed Ejdelman into the main building. The inside more closely resembled a Hasidic *shtetl* than a farmhouse: a folded prayer shawl was tossed onto a pile of prayer books in a corner, and a white tablecloth, slightly stained in some spots, was spread across a large table. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the place looked as if still arranged for yesterday’s Shabbos meal.

Despite these religious accoutrements (both Ejdelman and Bass are observant Jews, and only kosher food is served), Yiddish Farm’s purpose is decidedly secular. On the wall is a framed, hand-drawn declaration in Yiddish which lists the farm’s three goals: A broadened role for the Yiddish language, unity among Yiddish speakers, and “preserving the land” through organic farming.

Ejdelman and I sat down to talk, and soon we were joined by Bass and his wife Yamit — the two met when she came to take Yiddish classes one summer — and soon students, too, trickled in to join us.

Ejdelman, whose manner is light and boyish despite a short red beard and bookish spectacles, spoke easily about the value of keeping Yiddish vibrant. “If language is just for communication, why do you need a thousand languages?” The notion that language holds more than just words, that it is also a container for identity, culture and ideas is plain to him. “Try to maintain Latino culture without Spanish,” he says. “You just can’t.”

As a language without a country, however, Yiddish faces a unique challenge. For a language to thrive, it requires a designated space, apart from the dominant language. And so, Ejdelman and Bass founded Yiddish Farm.

I don’t remember when I first heard about modern Yiddishists and their efforts to keep Yiddish alive, but I do remember my reaction when told that Yiddish was dying.

*Huh?*

It seemed such a strange claim, when all around me thousands spoke it, many of whom spoke little else — including my own five children.

I’d spent until age 33 within the insular worlds of the Satmar and Skver Hasidim in Brooklyn and Rockland County, N.Y., where the spoken language was almost exclusively Yiddish. It was the language in which I’d spent endless hours of Talmud study, gossiped with friends, loved (and fought with) my wife, and loved (and yelled at) my kids. The notion that Yiddish was dying seemed not only ludicrous but offensive.

It wasn’t until I left the Hasidic world, after I’d suffered a faith crisis followed by an implosion of my social and familial connections (including my marriage), and after I’d spent several years as a secular Jew in New York, that I began to understand: I missed Yiddish. Trickle of nostalgia turned into a steady drip, if not quite a constant flow, but Yiddish outside of the Hasidic world did not appear readily available. Sure, I could speak it. To myself.

In recent decades, Yiddish, once beloved and ubiquitous — at least to Ashkenazi Jews — has become known largely for schmaltzy nostal-



## Yiddish is perhaps like a favorite dish from your grandmother's home.

gia, kvetchy inflections, joke punchlines and black-hatted Hasidim. Still, even if Yiddish today emitted little more than the reflective sheen of its old grandeur, for a long time I wasn't troubled. If the language was dying, I thought: *nu*, things die — plants, animals, humans — nothing lives forever. What's the *tummel*?

It wasn't until March of this year, when I was asked to give a video interview in Yiddish for the *Forverts*, now a weekly and one of the last remaining Yiddish newspapers, that I found something I never thought possible: After nearly eight years out of the Hasidic world, I was losing fluency in Yiddish. The loss was slight, barely perceptible, but I could feel it. For question after question, I had to think longer, harder — *what's that word?* my mind, again and again, tried to frantically recall. Even if the idea of Yiddish dying seemed remote, the idea that it was dying in *me* — or at least losing some life — began to feel very real.

And so I wondered: Could I stand to lose Yiddish? And if indeed secular Yiddish was dying, what could I do to hold onto it for myself?



Can Yiddish be a lingua franca in a world in which Jews do not seek to keep themselves apart? Can it be divorced from its religious roots?

Ann Toback, Executive Director of the Workmen's Circle, oversees an impressive list of Jewish cultural programs which include Yiddish classes for both adults and children. Fluency, she told me, isn't necessarily the goal. "We deal with Jewish identity as a whole, and Yiddish is part of that," she says. "How can you take away a language that was the predominant Jewish language 100 years ago? You can't."

Aside from the Workmen's Circle's Yiddish programs, there are numerous activities around Yiddish across the world: classes, summer camps, culture festivals and retreats. There are

two active Yiddish theatre companies. *Yiddish Vokh*, a weeklong festival dedicated to Yiddish, a project of *Yugntruf* — Youth for Yiddish — draws hundreds each summer. *KlezKanada*, an annual retreat in the Laurentian Mountains packed with arts and film programming, draws a veritable who's who from the world of contemporary Yiddish culture. The website *YiddishPOP*, an animated game that teaches Yiddish basics, is on several Yiddish-promoting groups' must-play lists.

Certainly, a lot of Yiddish is being learned.

Learning Yiddish, however, whether it's a couple hundred words or an advanced reading skill, is different from a language used in day-to-day life, which is why Yiddish Farm stands out with its peculiar mission: milking goats, harvesting wheat, planting garlic — all in Yiddish.

"It's immersive," Ejdelman told me, "not episodal."

*How do you make Yiddish sexy?* I had asked Ejdelman, and I suppose what I really wanted to know was: how do we get everyone to speak it? Or at least enough people for it to be considered *alive*.

Perhaps that's the wrong question, though. Perhaps aliveness isn't measured by the number of speakers, but by the fervor and enthusiasm of those who embrace it, promote it, learn it, teach it.

At Yiddish Farm, I looked around at the students who had come from all across the country — New England, the Midwest, the West Coast — and realized that my own attachment to Yiddish was, compared to theirs, quite limited. These students were there to embrace it all — they were happy to read any book, study it in any context, speak it while milking a goat or working in the garlic fields. They'd happily take any dialect or regional accent without prejudice.

I, on the other hand, missed a particular

kind of Yiddish, one rooted in religious ritual and practice, tied to a particular lifestyle, with particular accents and cadences, and filled with references I knew and understood. When I miss Yiddish, it is not the voluminous works of secular Yiddish literature, but the Yiddish of the Hasidic street, of the Hasidic home, the *shul*, the *mikve*, the *cheder*. But I am beginning to learn that Yiddish language and culture is more than just *my* experience of Yiddish.

To be sure, many of the classic Yiddish works were heavily informed by ritual and religious practice. From Sholem Aleichem's *shtetl* tales to Chaim Grade's *Yeshiva*, the stories are layered in the language of religious texts and lore. As Shane Baker, a 44-year-old Yiddish theatre actor, vaudevillian, magician and all around *kuntzler* told me regarding Bashevis Singer's use of Talmudic references: "They are as sensitive and beautiful as anything done by Shakespeare, but who's going to catch them?"

Perhaps not many, and that is unfortunate. But as culture changes, so does the language with it, and while some underlying components might be lost or forgotten as Yiddish speakers moved into different worlds, others come to replace it.

Yiddish is perhaps like a favorite dish from your grandmother's home; it isn't just about the food or its ingredients, or even the taste, but also the warm associations formed by the unique flavors, the unforgettable aromas, even the old china it was served on. The dish might be preserved, but it will also change, some ingredients substituted for others, prepared in new ways. A dish might also become unrecognizable through the passage of time (zucchini *latkes*, anyone? veal *cholent*?), but perhaps that is as it should be. Language, like a grandmother's dish, even when it is passed on, it changes.

And maybe that is exactly what makes it alive. And sexy. ■