

## Jewish Languages, Jewish Songs

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If a glass breaks in our kitchen, you might hear me yell out, "Oy vey!" in Yiddish, while my mother-in-law is crying, "Oras buenas, oras claras, malachim!" in Judeo-Spanish, and my husband is quietly saying in Hebrew, "Kapará." All are Jewish expressions, in three different but connected Jewish languages. Jewish songs also exist in languages such as Yemenite Judeo-Arabic, Farsi and Uzbeki, which are outside my own experience.

Hebrew is the ancient language that the Jews spoke in the land of Israel. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., Jews were dispersed from Israel. Hebrew became the language of prayerbooks and Torah, an ancient and holy language reserved for sacred ritual. Centuries later, with the birth of the modern state of Israel in 1948, this ancient language reawoke, and again became the language of chatting and playground games, shopping and gossip. Modern Hebrew is ancient Hebrew, adapted of course to function in today's world. The language of the Torah is the language of bus schedules and Coca Cola signs.

Songs in Hebrew are rich and varied. Last summer our radio in Tel Aviv's beach played the week's top rock songs by Israeli stars side by side with the Song of Songs. Every year in Israel there is a Song Festival in which the words of the Torah are put to new rock tunes. "Shma Yisrael," the ancient watchword of Jewish faith, is an upbeat pop tune.

Modern Hebrew song is proud, direct, realistic, thankful both for the honey and for the stinger that the bee must have in order to survive. Modern Hebrew song uses the word "tomorrow" often. "And if not tomorrow, the day after tomorrow," speaks Naomi Shemer, a modern-day psalmist in lilting melody.

Tomorrow perhaps we'll sail in boats  
From the shores of Eilat to the Ivory Coast  
And on the old destroyers  
They'll load oranges

Tomorrow perhaps in all the dens  
The lion will lie down with the lamb

All this is no legend, no dream  
It is as true as the light of day  
All this will come tomorrow, if not today  
And if not tomorrow, then the day after

Tomorrow when the army sheds its uniforms  
Our hearts will stand at attention  
Then each man with his own two hands will build  
What he dreams about today.  
    And if not tomorrow,  
        The day after.

The miraculous revival of Hebrew as a day-to-day language was possible because Jews over the centuries

continued to pray and perform holiday rituals in Hebrew, and also because the Jewish languages that evolved in the diaspora were so generously sprinkled with Hebrew expressions.

Yiddish was the language spoken by Jews who settled in Eastern Europe. Based largely on German, Yiddish retains many Hebrew words. The famous "Mazel Tov" (literally "Good fortune," colloquially used as "Congratulations!") that we hear at weddings is a Hebrew expression with Yiddish intonation. Many words have entered the English lexicon via Yiddish: who can translate the term "Chutzpa"? Who would have the chutzpa to try?

Yiddish song overflows with wisdom, with laughter and with tears. Judith Cohen, in an intriguing cassette of Jewish music from vastly varied sources, includes the song "Rivkele di Shabesdike." The Nazis deported the Jewish men of the Bialystok ghetto on Saturday, July 12, 1942. The wives of these men became known as the "Sabbath Ones." "Rivkele di Shabesdike," the Sabbath One, works in a factory; she pulls the thread through the needle, looks out at the bleak ghetto and wonders if her beloved is alive, suffering in a concentration camp. The words to this song were written by Peysakh Kaplan, who died in the Bialystok ghetto the year after he wrote the song.

My own memories of Yiddish song are sparse. "Zaidie Shmaidie," my grandfather would complain to me if I asked him to sing to me. And Buby preferred to sing Beethoven's Ninth to us, the glorious "Ode to Joy" chorus, or arias from Italian opera. In her last and forgetful days, long after she could talk, or understand, or even recognize our faces, Buby would sing along with us to Verdi's "Celeste Aida," correcting us when we sang out of tune. There was one other song she would sing with us, a song about *bulbes*, potatoes.

Sunday bulbes  
 Monday bulbes  
 Tuesday and Wednesday bulbes  
 Thursday bulbes  
 Shabbas, a special treat, potato kugel  
 And again on Sunday  
 Bulbes

Unlike the straightforward hope and confidence of modern Hebrew song, Yiddish sings in ironies. Isaac Bashevis Singer writes, "Yiddish had a Weltanschauung of its own. It was saying, one cannot go through life straight and directly, one can only sneak by.... The leitmotif of Yiddish was that if a day passes without a misfortune, it is a miracle from heaven." While modern Hebrew songs talk about tomorrow, Isaac Bashevis Singer tells us, "To the Yiddish artist yesterday is as actual as today. Those who died are not dead. Destroyed cities still throng with life."

Yiddish music does know how to be joyous. The Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band describe Klezmer as "a grab bag of influences from many other musics, and a lot of wild joy ... music that talks, strolls and runs. Music that laughs and winks at you, crying out music; music that burns, lilts and grooves and might be just a little meshuggenne, a little crazy. But when you look around and feel your feet start to move, you know that it's music that jumps up, shouts and dances. So get up and dance!"

The Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band sing a song called "Alle Brider":

We are all brothers and sisters  
 We love to sing and dance and get crazy with joy together  
 We love one another and we must make peace now, around the world.

Yiddish was not a temporary language, a language of exile while the Jews waited to return to Israel and the Hebrew language. The wealth of literature and song continues to grow. There is a thriving Yiddish culture in Canada. A new television show is produced from Calgary, devoted to Yiddish song and stories. At Calgary's Jewish Community Centre people get together regularly to chat and sing in Yiddish. The children at Calgary Jewish dayschools are taught Yiddish as part of their Judaic studies curriculum. Yiddish not only helped to keep Jewish culture alive through the years when Jews lived without a homeland; it remains a culture and a music related yet distinct.

Another diaspora language was Judeo-Spanish, or Spaniolit, as my mother-in-law calls the language she grew up with. Rachel's childhood was rich with song. As she and her five sisters sewed gloves throughout long winter nights in Turkey, they would sing sad and wistful love songs.

Los bilbilicos canton con sospiros de amor  
 Mi neshama mi ventura Estan en tu poder  
 La rosa enflorese en el mes de mai.  
 Mi neshama s'escurese, sufriendo del amor.

The nightingales sing with sighs of love  
 My soul and my fate are in your power.  
 The rose blooms in the month of May  
 My soul and my fate suffer from love's pain

When Rachel's elder brother married, another girl was added to the glove-sewing and singing. But this new sister-in-law wanted the sewing to go faster, and forced the others to sing more cheery songs.

The various dialects of Judeo-Spanish language trace their origins to Spain, where Jews thrived and developed a rich literary culture until the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. Always sprinkled with Hebrew terms such as *neshama* ("soul"), the language absorbed in its travels words from Greek, Rumanian, Turkish, the South Slavic languages, Portuguese, French, and Italian. In song and in story, the Jews who fled Spain kept their culture alive. On a winter afternoon, over cups of sweet Turkish coffee, I listen to my mother-in-law's words in Spaniolit:

My family had been in Turkey for many generations. I do not know how many. And I do not know how they came to settle in Turkey. But I do know that they did not forget Jerusalem. When my grandfather Yosef was sixteen years old, his mother Sultana became ill. Yosef journeyed for six months to bring her a small sack of Jerusalem's soil. She had it in her head that with that little bit of Jerusalem near her she would become well again. What could a son do but follow his mother's request? Only a handful of that soil, longed for over so many centuries. Tiera di Yerushalayim. And she would tuck it under her pillow, and sleep, and become well. Everyone dreamed of Jerusalem. Her fragrant breezes prevailed their souls and their songs.

Me 'sto soynando a las tierras di Yerushalayim  
 Y ir me kero, madre, a Yerushalayim

I'm dreaming of the lands of Jerusalem  
and I long to go, mother, to Jerusalem.

I cannot sing those melodies to you. I would cry. I cannot sing them for you. They are too sad. And so the son left his ailing mother and was gone for six months. And he returned to Istanbul torn, dusty, spent, with nothing in his hand but a small sack of Jerusalem's soil. And when he returned, he learned that his mother had already died. Do you see what stories I have in my heart?

I'm told there is an older stratum of Judeo-Spanish songs, which my mother-in-law's generation doesn't know, less sentimental and more connected to early Spain. However, most of the Judeo-Spanish songs I have heard are either lavishly sentimental romances ("Rain has fallen, soaking the streets and courtyard. Go tell my beloved it is from my eyes that the water came."), or sacred translations from biblical sources ("Bendicho Su nombre del Sinyor del mundo, Bendisha Tu corona y Tu lugar, Sea Tu voluntad con Tu pueblo Yisrael para siempre."). But there are those songs that combine intricately the biblical source with the diaspora experience:

When King Nimrod went into the fields,  
He looked at the heavens and at all the stars  
He saw a holy light above the Jewish quarter  
A sign that Abraham our father  
Was about to be born.

Avram avinu, padre querido  
padre bendicho, luz de Israel  
Abraham our father, beloved father,  
blessed father, light of Israel

Let us greet the compadre  
and also the moel [the man who performs the circumcision]  
Because of his virtue may the Messiah come  
to redeem all Israel.

Judith Cohen's *Primavera en Salonica* cassette contains several songs in Judeo-Spanish, accompanied by medieval vielle, derbukka, Turkish spoons, oud, and saz. She traces the evolution of song and culture, the "folk process," as we lovingly call it when songs get borrowed and changed over years. In "La Vuelta del Marido Suite," she sings several versions of the tale, "The husband (often a soldier) returns disguised; his wife or fiancée asks if he has seen her beloved; he replies that the latter is dead and has told him to marry her, but the faithful woman refuses, upon which he reveals himself. The magic number 7 is usually present: she has waited 7 years for his return." Cohen sings Judeo-Spanish versions of this song from Alcazarquivir, Morocco, and Turkey, along with versions from 15th Century France, Acadie, and the English broadside version, John Riley. When my mother-in-law heard these songs, she showed me in her book of songs, another with the same story, ending,

Diera yo mis tres doblones  
 Porque vos lo truxeras aqui  
 No pensex mas, mi senora  
 Yo so el vuestro Amadi.

Rachel even had a song for me about potatoes, Sunday patatas, Monday patatas, but in her version the Shabbat treat was Burmuelos di patates. This to me shows the universality of song and the intertwining of the varied Jewish cultures with world culture over the years.

Jewish song carries with it wisdom, tears and laughter. Just as the Jewish world has taken and given freely chicken soup and matzo balls, bagels and lox, burmuelos and burekas, felafel and pita, Jewish song has learned from its surroundings and given to its surroundings. And through this layered and textured folk process the world is richer.

### Discography

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(A comprehensive discography/bibliography prepared by Judith Cohen and Edwin Seroussi for the **Jewish Folklore and Ethnography Review** is currently in press.)