

Why I Write in Yiddish

Karen Alkalay-Gut
Tel Aviv University

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Recommended Citation

Alkalay-Gut, Karen. "Why I Write in Yiddish." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.1 (): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3704>>

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
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FreeWrite

Volume 22 Issue 1 (March 2020) Article 12

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/12>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.1 (2020)**
Special Issue **Poetry in Israel: Forging Identity**. Ed. Chanita Goodblatt
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/>>

Karen ALKALAY-GUT**Why I Write in Yiddish**

I used to get a big laugh from my friends when I let slip that I was planning on publishing a book of poetry in Yiddish. "You're determined to be anonymous!" they'd exclaim. "Even if there's anyone left who reads Yiddish, they're going to go for classic prose like Sholom Aleichem, not poetry—certainly not from an English poet who lives in Israel and suddenly feels a need to explore a long-gone personal past!"

But many of those friends showed up to the book launch in the spring of 2018, and some of them later whispered that they hadn't realized that they actually knew a few words. Some even told me that they suddenly recalled a few expressions in Yiddish from their youth, a phrase their parents used, a couple of words from their neighbors, a punchline from a joke that can't be translated into any other language. I found myself announcing that if we could take all those bits and pieces, add them up, join them together, and build up something from them, maybe it would do us some good, and maybe we could help revitalize a worthy and useful language. "Not only do you live in a closet, in some past century," my best friend responded, "but you live in another world!" I wanted to respond with the answer Isaac Bashevis Singer gave when he was asked why he wrote Yiddish when no one could read it – that when the Messiah came, and all the Jews came back to life, he'd have the biggest audience. But of course there is no comparison, my Yiddish doesn't come from living in the language and its literary environment and can never match Singer's richness and depth.

Still, I've been writing poetry in Yiddish for almost fifty years now. Something would come to mind from some childhood kitchen conversation; something would happen that I would want to see from an ironic perspective; or I'd start talking to myself in the mirror in that sardonic way only Yiddish could express. In those moments I would try to turn the experience into the written word, but rarely would I write it down without first translating it into English. So often these poems came out lame and private, with unclear humor, and most of the time I put them aside as words that would have meaning for me alone.

The Yiddish language for me was not just from home. My Hebrew education in a Jewish day school was supplemented by old-fashioned Bible classes two days a week. The aged Rabbi Gedaliah Cohen, who taught bar mitzvah boys to sing, agreed for some reason to take me on as a student of the Bible – reading with me a sentence in Ashkenazi Hebrew and translating it into Yiddish. My mother, who must have done some special convincing to get me accepted as his student, used to laugh at the frequent misunderstandings that must have resulted from these lessons. She would tell me about it in Yiddish (my translation into English):

The teacher says "Vayomos – And died, Sora – Sarah. Now child, tell me. Who died?"
 "Vayomos died."
 "Child, Sarah died."
 "What? Both of them?"
 "Silly child, the translation is 'dead'.
 "Vayomos, Sora, AND the translation? All three? Must have been a plague!"

My mother's anecdote led me to take great care of translation in the future, and respect the independence of individual languages. I would constantly ask the rabbi questions about the meaning of the words, the meaning of the text. For some reason the weary octogenarian respected my questions and considered his answers carefully, no matter how outrageous they were. One of my earliest poems in English describes the nature of our dialogues:

I Explain Darwin to the Rebbe

The old man and I sit on the porch- -
 It is Indian summer and the weather
 lures us with our books outside.
 And the madness of the season
 makes me stop the lesson of Bereisheit
 with- -"Rebbe, what do you think of Darwin?"

The rabbi of the "Kipple" shul knows no English- -
 we discuss the Bible in Mamme-loshen.
 And what has he read

that he should know of "The Origin of Species"
So he asks me to explain- -and I do- -
in my most grown up eleven year old tone- -
about the apes, the jungle, survival
of the fittest.

It is eleven years since the Holocaust.
In the twilight he is silent, rocking
very slightly as he arranges his decision.

"Bobbe Meisses," he says, and I nod,
suddenly in revelation.
"You learn what you must for school
but of course no one can really
believe in such stories."

One lesson the Rabbi taught me was that in Yiddish anything could be legitimately questioned. Yiddish opened up possibilities of providing alternative perspectives on everything.

This method of open questioning came up just recently in a poem, while I was writing a series of lyrics in English about Biblical heroines for the rock group Panic Ensemble. The singer, Yael Kraus, wanted to sing from the viewpoint of otherwise silent women, and I wrote from the perspective of Lot's wife, as one reluctant to leave the revels of Sodom:

Sodom

Look, look at the light!
See the sky glowing bright with the fire
Burning up, last night we were one
I want you to stay in my eyes

Oh the wildest nights
Holding the men
And women of Sodom
I want to love them all

Taste, drunk with the night,
Taste my blood grown thick with desire
Burning up, blinded by love
I want them to stay in my arms

Oh the wildest nights
Holding the men
And women of Sodom
I want to love them all

Before us now - banal days
One life one love one lord
Empty land, no pleasure of love
I choose to purge it from my heart

Oh the wildest nights
Holding the men
And women of Sodom
I am becoming salt.

I wrote about Jezebel as a material girl, about Vashti warning the other women of the dangers of acceding to her punishment, and about Hagar as a victim of a jealous competitor, after the manner of the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger. But with Rebecca I was stuck. Reading the chapter about Rebecca over and over, I could not understand her first reaction to the sight of her future husband after covering her face. The Hebrew says "*Vatipol mi hagamal*"; a literal translation would be that as soon as she caught sight of Isaac, she "fell off the camel." But the usual explanations describe her veiling and descent as a mark of her deep respect. Ultimately what emerged was a poem about what it was like to see my intended husband as a forty-year-old shell-shocked virgin, after I'd been prepared by the sophisticated and expensive courtship of the slave. This was my Talmud teaching—turning a situation around and seeing it from the opposite possibility—if only to check out the options, if only to make sure that the

conclusion reached is the only one. The Aramaic term is *Ifcha mistabra*. The English would be—"it wouldn't hurt to try it on." This way of looking at holy texts continues to appeal to me, to remind me that it is always good to examine other possibilities.

It was not just the Rabbi with whom I learned the nuances that language could provide and the unorthodox ways of thinking. The afternoons I didn't go to study Bible were spent in the Workmen's Circle Y.L. Peretz Folk Shule, where history began with the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the beginning of unions in the United States.

Where does Jewish history really begin? Wherever it began, it was connected in my mind with Yiddish. Eventually when I entered university, it was not surprising that I studied with Hayden White, who when he was introduced to me as one of the foremost historians of the day I responded "So, who are the other three?" History for White was a question of narrative with ideological implications. I was at home with that revolutionary concept because I'd been living it in three languages.

So much was brought to life through Yiddish. Because there were so few pupils in the Yiddish school—all children of refugees who wished to preserve a tradition in the face of a seductive new world - we were encouraged to express ourselves, to use the language in any way possible. Every year there was the Purim Shpiel where I played Haman, my head wrapped in a large Turkish towel, sporting a wonderful villainous moustache and shouting out curses in Yiddish. A national Yiddish composition contest about the American Jewish socialist and Zionist, Louis Dembitz Brandeis, brought me to read my winning essay on the *Yiddish Shtunde*, the local Yiddish radio program, when I was ten. Soon after that an ironic essay about my epicurean cat was published in the pages of the Yiddish newspaper, the *Forwards*, in response to my mother's worry that my concern for felines would lead me to a *katz in kopp* (a cat in my head, an obsession with cats).

Had my family not needed to move to escape the declining neighborhood, I'm sure my love for the language would have continued to direct my talents. But the entire scene disappeared at the same time—the school, the shops that transacted their business in Yiddish, the daily visits and conversations of neighbors, the bargaining in the synagogue for a chance to go up to the Torah and chant a blessing. But most people left that all behind as they became assimilated into American culture.

My mother and father continued to fight for the presence of Yiddish, even after we moved to a more bourgeois Jewish neighborhood where the old ways were an embarrassment at best. Among their many activities my parents organized a Yiddish Cultural Council and made sure to bring numerous theater troupes, writers and poets travelling through the country to appear before a loyal audience at the Jewish center. Some of the characters stand out even today in my memory.

But the most entertaining was the one to become the best known. When I was fifteen I was introduced to Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel *Satan in Goray*. It had just come out in English, and to me it was almost as exciting as Jack Kerouac or Henry Miller. A year or two after that, it was announced that Isaac Bashevis Singer would be the next Yiddish lecturer and even though I was beginning to see myself as "intellectual" and look down at the newcomers, the *Greener*, I found a corner to sit at his lecture where I could dissociate myself from the crowd.

As Singer began to speak—an old spiel that I've heard many times since about all the ways in which (because of its outsider status) one could use Yiddish to be "naughty," it was clear that his take on what to them was a holy tongue was not pleasing to the audience. There were little "no's" and "oy's" and even a few gasps. I seem to remember that Florence Newman announced loudly that she was about to faint. After the weak polite applause at the conclusion, my mother took Singer by the hand, brought him to my little corner, and said "HERE is a person who appreciates your approach!" I was left to entertain the speaker while my parents were busy apologizing to all their friends who had expected culture and received "filth."

For both of us this was a pleasure. His joy at being left alone with a young woman was unbounded and the other results of the evening disappeared for him. At the obligatory dinner which followed I cannot remember the conversation, but am sure it included only two happy diners. Later he seemed not to remember our first meeting, even though we met in other circumstances on numerous occasions. I'm certain he forgot those days when his "bad boy" performances were booed.

But I doubt whether he was really a "bad boy." By the time I caught up with him again in New York a few years later, Singer's relationships to women seemed to be based more on their ability to translate to English—not his words but his ideas. Often his translators didn't even know the language, but relied on his reading what he claimed to be a spontaneous but literal translation in order to craft a tale. I am certain that Yiddish was to him a kind of secret language that allowed his thoughts to range uncensored even as he rewrote his memories and fantasies. The rarity and depth of the language opened for him the door to another world.

And so it was with me. Although I had crafted many poems in my mind, and had even written some poems in Yiddish, the need to write in English confined me. I published in Canada, the United States and Great Britain as well as in Israel. It was only when the publishing house of the Yiddish Writers in Israel, Beit Leyvick, having heard me read poetry in Yiddish, turned to me to ask for a little volume of poems that I felt both the justification and the freedom to really explore the Yiddish in me.

My collection of poems began with a discussion of the difficulty of writing—I lacked the vocabulary—and the first Yiddish poem in my collection is about my unworthiness to be a Yiddish poet (my English translation):

Yiddish

It is hard and bitter
to write in Yiddish

So sweet a language
So pungent the memories,
I have not the tongue
To convey

Of course this is my English translation of the Yiddish, and translation—particularly of a poem about the original language—cannot be either faithful or beautiful.

My next poem in Yiddish admitted the dangers of being influenced by imagining the denunciation by Yiddish purists, the inner voice that mocked at how much easier it would be in English, and how I would have to simply ignore the potential criticism and even worse, the absence of response (my English translation):

Writing Poems

"Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs - !"
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

I have removed all the locks from the doors,
and torn all the doors from their jambs
and lowered myself to the floor
staring at the view.
After that I put all the doors back
And sealed up all the entrances.
After all, who would want to come in?
Maybe at best a few muses who'd peek
over my shoulder while I try to write
and sing:

"You will thank us
for freeing
an entire morning
from your weird thoughts.
You've gone far enough afield.
Write no more.

Even if there exists
one single reader
and he reads your writing,
and makes a face at what he reads
and says: 'there are many better poets
who write on the same subjects
and say much more original things..
and say it more creatively than you do,'

And ultimately
if there exists an editor
interested in publishing a book,
he has to consider if it is worth
investing so much money
in your strange project,

who knows if anyone will buy."

I think, that in the future,
when I plan to remove all the locks
from all the doors
I will not inform the muses.

Then I began to include some of the poems that came to me from long-ago voices, and the imperative to use the language of the stories I had heard about relatives who had disappeared became a driving force despite my linguistic unfitness. I only dared write about some of the memories – my partisan aunt, the rogue great-aunt who grudgingly took us in when we came to America, the post-war refugees my parents sheltered for many years. Here is one example of a poem I published in English translation in the literary magazine *Prairie Schooner* before it emerged in print in Yiddish:

Her Story

I have never been able to tell her story
Sometimes it escapes me, sometimes I am not sure
It could really have happened, sometimes I read
Different accounts of her demise, or a paragraph
From some testimony jogs my memory and the terrible days
When I first heard what happened to her return.

This much is in my blood:
I was conceived on the day she died.
This much is in my blood.
She blew up trains.
The courage came from her uplifted chin
And the two infants she watched
Dashed against the wall of their home.
Avram twelve months old and Masha two years.
My first cousins.
They too - in my blood – all that is left.

If I can write of these babies,
I can manage the rest –
Following her path as she escaped
The prison camp with her husband
And joined the Otrianski Otriade
Lenin Brigade, Lipinskana Forest.

I can feel her mouth, her narrow lips clamped
As she bends over the delicate mines,
Solemn as in the photo when as a child
She sat for with the rest of the choir
Unsmiling amid the festive singers
Unwilling perhaps to feel poetic joy
Perhaps destined for so much more.

There are at least three accounts of her death:
The partisan Abba Kovner told me she was caught
In a mission and hung. He looked away when he spoke,
Not piercing me as always with his tragic eyes,
And I knew there was more he would not say.

Another book says she lagged behind the platoon
Escaping an attack, perhaps pregnant,
And was imprisoned in Zhedtl.
The jail was ignited, perhaps by accident,
And she was just one of the victims.

When Mother first told me the story
She had just heard at the hairdresser's,
I was only a child, and outraged
That she was weeping, tears

Rolling down her face. She knew
All I cared for was my own life,
And her latest discovery
Of the fate of her youngest sister
A disruption.
But who else could she tell?

The loft in the barn, she said,
They were hiding there – three women,
Her husband and her. They came
And set the barn afire. He helped
The women first, and his wife came last
But didn't come, was burnt alive.

Malcah Malcah who saved all our lives
Malcah who was waiting for them
When the ship brought them back to Danzig
After they were barred from the Holy Land,
Who found them the agricultural visas to England
And saw them off the night that Hitler invaded.

But there is no real story.
All that remains is a faded snapshot
A few sentences in unread memorial tomes,
And me, who cannot tell any story for sure.

But then even daily life began to appear to me more interesting in the ironic perspective of Yiddish. I translate it here:

Cats

I can't walk the streets of Tel Aviv
without trying to talk to the cats in charge,
most of the time with little success

They know my tongue
but disdain to acknowledge it.
After all they are busy,
have more important things to do:

delineating their turf
making sure they're waiting in place
when the neighborhood ladies
come out with their sacks of food

calling out in their heat in the afternoon
of the intensity and pain of coupling
or rounding their full bellies to the sun
and delicately exercising their nails

And the world all around
The wonderful mixture
Of colors and cultures,
With all our memories of wars,
With utter dread,
With wealth and poverty
The world of us,
The little human beings,
Don't bother them at all.

Clearly everyone who translates has problems with relating the meaning of idioms, but when I made a birthday cake, and wanted to relate the concrete significance of the sharing celebratory food on it, I wrote (my English translation):

Is a blessing
And a prayer
And a kind of poem;

Sweet words
Melting into
Each one of
those who share
In the joy.

Here. Take. Eat

A *lekeh* in Yiddish is a homophonic play on words: the Yiddish *lekeh* meaning honey cake; and the Hebrew *lekeh* meaning lesson. Whenever my mother passed a piece of her famous sponge cake to me she would recall the imperative from the *Book of Proverbs* 4:2: "I have given you a good lesson [*lekeh*], do not forsake my teaching." The English or the Hebrew cake couldn't match the Yiddish in its cultural complexity.

But as there were no guests to read the Yiddish, the cake remained in translations:



Other stories and the other people, no less colorful, remain in drafts—the gypsies' abduction of my mother, one of my uncle's raucous humor, the beatings my father received on the streets of Danzig, my brother's failed attempt to assert democracy in our new home in the new world. I thought I would await a response before I continued in my efforts. A review, a few gruff responses, a comical observation. Nothing came.

Fortunately, only after I'd completed a draft in Yiddish, the publishers requested that the book be dual-language, and although I generally use Hebrew only for prose, I found it comfortable to translate the poems into Hebrew. The Hebrew translations, facing the Yiddish poems, succeeded in winning numerous reviews, all praising—first the nerve and then the nostalgia (nothing about the poetry). The Hebrew versions were reprinted in many journals and newspapers. A Yiddish review in the *Forwards* by

Zachary Shalom Berger brought me to ecstasy, even though it was probably read only by my brother, who believed the entire review was a misreading.

There were at least two people who helped me with the Yiddish—the poet Rivka Bassman Ben-Haim and the writer Daniel Galay. They encouraged me all the way, but I had to think for a while if it was really worthwhile to publish in Yiddish. After all, it meant neglecting my English poetry for well over a year. It wasn't just a change of language, but of exploring a different corner of my heart, of reaching into forgotten places not only of my own history, but the history of a culture. Often they mesh—there are so many examples of *mamme loshen* (mother tongue) I have heard nowhere else: When my baby could not be calmed in the first three months of her life, and the doctors had told me to let her cry, my mother performed a ritualistic cleansing of my apartment from the evil eye. I bring the Yiddish poem in translation:

A Charm Against the Eye

Whoever has given you the evil eye
May rough bark cover his hide.
Whoever has given you the evil eye
May rough bark cover his hide.
In the forests there are four heaps of dung
May the curse disappear in their depths.
In the forests there are four heaps of dung
May the curse disappear in their depths.

It was tongue-in-cheek, of course, but her order for the evil eye to be hidden away in four piles of muck in the forest seemed to work. My daughter slept that night for the first time. I remember every word of that charm. Who else knows it? If I don't write it down, and explain the process of the ritual, who will know?

I did not always respect the culture of the orphan generation, the generation who could not pass on their wit and knowledge to their children. In college, exposed to so many other cultures, I was particularly impervious to the wisdom of the elders. One example: my folk dance troupe specialized in couple dancing, and my dance partner and I were scheduled for a performance. Not only was my dancing lacking in grace and charm, but I had a tendency to turn left when everyone else was turning right. And my partner was increasingly being drawn to a beautiful and graceful dancer with a long blond braid. The dance he and I were to perform was called the Alexandrovskia, popular in the court of the Czar, and involved a turn in which my partner was supposed to lift me up and lower me on his other side. My blond competition was much lighter and more agile than me. Fearing I would be replaced, I practiced every chance I could get, humming the music and swaying as I passed my parents, ignoring their presence. "Oh, I know that song!" My mother exclaimed suddenly, and then began to sing:

In Vilna, the maidens,
they go to dance classes.
And the boys
Laugh at the lasses

They whirl the *valchick* [little waltz]
this way and there –
each little maiden
with her cavalier.

The translation is mine—and I haven't found anyone who knows the song in its original. Nevertheless the song was important for me. When my partner exchanged me for the blond (and later married her), that song made me shrug it off. Taking oneself too seriously is difficult in Yiddish.

Despite all the efforts to revive the language, sometimes now, when I meet my friends with a Yiddish-speaking ancestor they will remember an incident from their grandmother, or a saying of their grandfather, or just a phrase. And often it is something I have never heard of. It may not be in the dictionary or a phrasebook, but surely it deserves an effort on our part keep it alive by writing it down.

But the bulk of my Yiddish is still to be written. The stories, songs, and poems I heard as a child that I have not found recited anywhere else echo only in my mind. So when my back aches I encourage myself to move when I recall my mother's cousin, Frieda, tell me that as a child her rickets limited her mobility until she was given a back brace and invited to dance: *Tu on dein corsetke and tanz unz a kasachok*—"Put on your corset and dance a kazachok for us." And when I think of taking shortcuts in

my housework I remember what my grandmother told her many daughters, "How can you get married if you don't know how to slice a tableload of dough into noodles?"

Sometimes the phrases are well-known to speakers of Yiddish but unknown anywhere else, and supremely appropriate only in Yiddish. Some words are irrelevant in today's culture. Who wears *meitkehs* (bloomers) nowadays?

But the real reason I write in Yiddish seems to be not in preserving history or memories. It may be in one of the poems in my little book (my translation from the Yiddish):

Memory

when they tell you to remember
they mean there is a possibility
you might forget. But within me
are brothers and sisters
who were never born

memory has nothing to do
with remembering.

So I guess I will continue to write in Yiddish, no matter who reads my poems.

Author's profile: Karen Alkalay-Gut is Professor (Retired) of English Literature at Tel Aviv University. She has published scholarly studies on modern American poetry (including *Alone in the Dawn: The Life of Adelaide Crapsey*), as well as over a dozen books of poetry in English (the latest being *Hanging Around the House. Simple Conundrums*), and the Yiddish book *Yerusha*. She has also has recorded several disks with the rock group *Panic Ensemble*. Email: <gut22@tauex.tau.ac.il>