

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

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## Rotwelsch, Hebrew Loanwords in

*Rotwelsch* (or *Gaunersprache*, i.e., German for 'language of swindlers') is the term used for the argot employed by crooks, thieves, and vagabonds in the German-speaking portions of central Europe, with its home in southwestern Germany especially. The latter portion of the term, *Welsch*, suggests any foreign and unintelligible speech (as a comparison, note Yiddish *Wellisch* 'Italian'); while the former portion of the term, *Rot* derives either from *Rotwelsch* *Rot* 'beggar' (perhaps ultimately from German *rot* 'red' > 'false, faithless'), German *Rotte* 'gang, band', or Middle Dutch *rot* 'foul, dirty' (see further Girtler 2010:21–22). This sociolect originated in the Middle Ages (the term *Rotwalsch* [*sic*] is first attested about 1250), though the most abundant sources for the cant derive from lexicons and word lists from the early modern period through the 19th century. Among the most important sources is the *Rotwelsch* vocabulary that appears in *Liber Vagatorum* (1510), a work which also provides key insights into the lifestyle and customs of the vagabonds, including their tricks and strategies (cf. Jütte 1988:106).

While the base of *Rotwelsch* is German(ic), its lexis includes an exceedingly high percentage of Hebraisms, derived either from Hebrew directly (with typical Ashkenazi pronunciation) or via the intermediary of (Western) Yiddish. According to one estimate, fully twenty-two percent of the *Rotwelsch* lexis revealed in the aforementioned *Liber Vagatorum* derives from Hebrew (Jütte 1987:136). The presence of so many Hebraisms reflects the fact that Jews were involved in the relevant livelihoods. Officially excluded from the guilds and civic enterprises during the Middle Ages and beyond, Jews resorted to such occupations as hucksters, itinerant merchants, conveyers of movable goods, and the like (and were often joined in these endeavors by the 'gypsies', whose Sinti-Romani dialect thus also contributes heavily to the *Rotwelsch* lexicon). As typically happens, such business ventures frequently entailed less-than-honest, if not illegal and fraudulent, deals that required a secret language or coded argot. In such fashion, one can understand how numerous Hebraisms entered *Rotwelsch*, even when spoken by non-Jews who partnered with Jews in these deceitful and criminal activities.

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Rotwelsch was used into the 20th century and still survives to some extent as an element of folklore in the villages of Schopfloch and Schillingsfürst (both situated in the Franconian part of Bavaria). The language may also be heard as an entertainment component from showmen at popular fairs. In addition, occasional words entered various local dialects (Siewert 2003:45–61; → Germanic Languages, Hebrew Loanwords in).

As intimated above, the number of Hebrew elements in the Rotwelsch vocabulary is truly staggering. What follows is merely a sampling. In the examples listed, if the Rotwelsch term connotes the same as its Hebrew derivation, then the gloss for the latter is not presented. Only in cases where the semantic connection is less obvious, or if the part of speech is different (e.g., Rotwelsch verb derived from Hebrew adjective), is a gloss included for the Hebrew source as well. In all instances, the spelling of the Rotwelsch lexemes is taken from the head words listed in Wolf's (1956) standard dictionary (though spelling is highly variable, naturally). The transcription of the Hebrew terms is a simplified version of the Masoretic realization; the Ashkenazi pronunciation, which yielded the Rotwelsch form, would have been different, e.g., /t/ was realized as [s].

Many basic Rotwelsch verbs derive from Hebrew: *acheln* 'to eat' (cf. אכל 'k-l'); *assern* 'to prohibit' (cf. אָסור 'asur' 'prohibited'); *dibbern* 'to speak' (cf. דבר 'd-b-r'); *halchen* 'to go' (cf. הלך 'h-l-k'); *nassenen* 'to give' (cf. נתן 'n-t-n'); *niftern* 'to die' (cf. נִפְטָר 'niṭṭar' 'to pass away'); *pattern* 'to allow, permit' (cf. פָּטור 'paṭur' 'free from an obligation'); *posseln* 'to cook' (cf. בשל 'b-š-l'); *schasjenen* 'to drink' (cf. שתה 'š-t-y'); *schauern* 'to sing' (cf. שָׁר 'š-y-r'); *schefften* 'to sit, lie' (cf. ישב 'y-š-b' 'to sit'; the Rotwelsch verb also means 'to do, work, go', most likely through contamination with southern German *schaffen* 'to work' [cf. standard German *Geschäft* 'business']); *schmaien* 'to hear, understand' (cf. שמע 'š-m-'). Occasionally such verbs receive German prefixes to form a new word with a nuanced meaning, e.g., *verschmaien* 'to examine, interrogate' (cf. German *verhören* with the same connotation).

Not surprisingly, words relevant to the work of the hucksters and swindlers occur in good number: *Begeed* 'garment' (cf. בגד 'begeed'); *chelkenen* 'to divide' (cf. חלק 'h-l-q'); *Ganneu* 'thief'

(cf. גָּנַב 'gannab'); *Jerid* 'fair, market, exhibition' (cf. יָרִיד 'yerid'); *Kesef* 'silver' (cf. כֶּסֶף 'kesef'); *Kies* 'money' (cf. כֵּס 'kis' 'pocket'); *Kippe* 'box, coffer' (cf. קֶפֶה 'quppa'); *Macker* 'acquaintance, partner, fellow swindler' (cf. מַכִּיר 'makkir' 'acquaintance'); *Machne* 'camp' (cf. מַחֲנֶה 'maḥane'); *Malbusch* 'clothing' (cf. מַלְבוּשׁ 'malbuš'); *Mammon* 'wealth' (cf. מָמוֹן 'mamon'); *maul* 'cheater' (cf. מַעַל 'ma'al' 'betrayal'); *mebeln* 'to bring, buy' (cf. מוֹבִיל 'mobil' 'carrier, conveyer'); *meloche* 'work' (cf. מְלָאכָה 'melaka'); *meramme sein* 'to betray' (cf. רִמָּי 'r-m-y' 'to deceive, betray' + German *sein* 'to be'); *Merkof* 'wagon' (cf. מֶרְקָבָה 'merkaba' 'chariot'); *Mezie* 'find, good buy' (cf. מְצִיָּא 'meš'a' 'find'); *schachern* 'to conduct business' (cf. סַחַר 's-h-r').

But even the basic vocabulary of ordinary items includes words of Hebrew origin (some of these, of course, may relate to the business ventures as well): *Bais* 'house' (cf. בַּיִת 'bayit'); *Egel* 'calf' (cf. עֵגֶל 'egel'); *Jaar* 'forest' (cf. יַעַר 'ya'ar'); *Jajin* 'wine' (cf. יַיִן 'yayin'); *Kelef* 'dog' (cf. כֶּלֶב 'keleḅ'); *ken* 'yes' (cf. כֵּן 'ken'); *Lechem* 'bread' (cf. לֶחֶם 'leḥem'); *Mockum* 'city, place' (cf. מְקוֹם 'maqom' 'place'); *Nuze* 'feather' (cf. נוֹצָה 'noša'); *Parosch* 'flea' (cf. פְּרָעֵשׁ 'par'oš'); *Peger* 'corpse' (cf. פֶּגֶר 'peger'); *Por* 'ox, steer' (cf. פָּר 'par'); *Saam* 'gift' (cf. שָׂמַם 'š-y-m' 'to put, give'); *Sackin* 'knife' (cf. סַכִּין 'sakkīn'); *Schaar* 'gate' (cf. שַׁעַר 'š'a'ar'); *Schemen* 'oil' (cf. שֶׁמֶן 'šemen'); *Schemesch* 'sun' (cf. שֶׁמֶשׁ 'šemeš'); *Schocher* 'coffee' (cf. שְׁחֹר 'šəḥor' 'black' [see below for the color term]); *Tappuach* 'apple' (cf. תַּפּוּחַ 'tappuah'); *Tanner* 'oven' (cf. תַּנּוּר 'tannur').

Similarly with certain body parts, e.g., *Ammo* 'middle finger' (cf. אֶמְמָה 'amma'); *Enaim* 'eyes' (cf. עֵינַיִם 'enayim'); *Jad* 'hand' (cf. יָד 'yad'); *Patzuf* 'face' (cf. פְּרִצּוּף 'parṣuḥ' 'face, profile'); *Ponim* 'face' (cf. פָּנִים 'panim'); *Rosch* 'head' (cf. רוֹשׁ 'roš'); *Schen* 'tooth' (cf. שֵׁן 'šen). An interesting usage is *Nuche* 'mouth, face' (cf. נוֹכַח 'nokah' 'one who is positioned before or opposite').

And likewise for family relations, e.g., *Aches* 'brother' (cf. אָח 'ah); *Achaf* 'sister' (cf. אַחֹת 'ahot), *Bar* 'son' (cf. בַּר 'bar [originally Aramaic]); *Baf* 'daughter' (cf. בַּת 'bat). In the same general semantic field, note also *Gewer* 'man' (cf. גֶּבֶר 'geber'); *Mischpoche* 'family' (cf. מִשְׁפָּחָה 'mišpaḥa'). Special attention should be given to *Nekef* with a wide range of meanings: 'hole, gap', 'prison', 'dame, woman' (cf. נֶקֶבָה 'neqeba' 'female').

Other items include: *afilu* 'even' (cf. אֲפִילוּ 'afilu'); *Aschre* 'good [n], blessedness' (cf. אֲשֶׁרִי 'asḥre').

'*ašre* 'happy'); *betuach* 'certain' (cf. *בטוח* *baṭuah*); *chole* 'sick' (cf. *חולה* *hole*); *Dalles* 'poverty' (cf. *דלות* *dallut*); *joschen* 'old' (cf. *ישן* *yašan*); *schaaf* 'false' (cf. *שוא* *šaw*); *ma* 'what?' (cf. *מה* *ma*); *Malches* 'kingdom, principality' (cf. *מלכות* *malcut*); *Mamser* 'bastard' (cf. *ממזר* *mamzer*); *Masel* 'luck, fate' (cf. *מזל* *mazal* 'luck, fate'); *Medine* 'land' (cf. *מדינה* *medina*); *Melitz* 'lawyer, advocate' (cf. *מליץ* *melīš* 'intercessor'); *mischpot* 'law, trial' (cf. *משפט* *mišpat*); *Schale* 'question' (cf. *שאלה* *še'ela*); *Schem* 'name' (cf. *שם* *šem*); *Schibbusch* 'mistake' (cf. *שבוש* *šibbuš*); *schocher* 'black' (see above for the nominalized form *שחור* *šahor* meaning 'coffee'). One notes in this list not only nouns (the most common Hebraisms in other languages, and indeed the most common borrowings from language to language), but also adverbs, adjectives, and an interrogative pronoun.

Days are indicated by recourse to Hebrew: *Jom olef* 'Sunday' (cf. *יום א' yom 'alef*); *Jom bes* 'Monday' (cf. *יום ב' yom bet*); *Jom gimel* 'Tuesday' (cf. *יום ג' yom gimel*); etc. Note also *Jom* 'day' (cf. *יום yom*); *Laile* 'night' (cf. *לילה* *layla*); *mocher* 'tomorrow' (cf. *מחר* *maḥar*). The former two are combined with the German preposition to create adverbials *bei Jom* 'by day' and *bei Laile* 'by night'. An interesting usage is *Techille* 'evening', derived from *תחלה* *teḥilla* 'beginning', since the Jewish day begins at sunset.

For numerals Rotwelsch occasionally employs the Hebrew alphabet for counting, thus: *oluf* (cf. *א' alef*) '1', *bes* (cf. *ב' bet*) '2', *gimel* (cf. *ג' gimel*) '3', *dolles* (cf. *ד' dalet*) '4', *he* (cf. *ה' he*) '5', *fof* (cf. *ו' waw*) '6', *sain* (cf. *ז' zayin*) '7', *aches* (cf. *ח' het*) '8', *dess* (cf. *ט' tet*) '9', *jutljuss* (cf. *י' yod*) '10'; *juss oluf* (cf. *יא' yod 'alef*) '11', etc.; *kaf* (cf. *כ' kaf*) '20', *lames* (cf. *ל' lamed*) '30'; *mem* (cf. *מ' mem*) '40', etc. (Wolf 1956:352). Oddly, *mem* is used for '100' as well, based on *מאה* *me'a*. It is not clear how Rotwelsch speakers distinguished '40' from '100', a crucial issue, obviously, when engaged in business transactions.

A creative use of the letters of the alphabet is seen in *lametaleph* 'no', comprised of the names of the two letters that spell the Hebrew word: *לא lo* 'no', namely, *ל* / *lamed* and *א* / *alef*.

A special feature of Rotwelsch is its innovative use of word combinations to create new lexemes. These include the following: *Baldower* 'spy, scout' < *בעל* *ba'al* 'master' + *דבר* *daḅar* 'word, matter'; *Ballmischpet* 'examining mag-

istrate' < *בעל* *ba'al* 'master' + *משפט* *mišpat* 'law, trial'; *Balloch* 'sky, heaven' < *בעל* *ba'al* 'master' + *על* *'aleka* 'over you, above you'; *Balschochad* 'corrupt person, one who can be bribed' < *בעל* *ba'al* 'master' + *שחד* *šohad* 'bribe'; *Basmeichl* 'vulva' < *בת* *bat* 'daughter' (see above) + *מחילה* *meḥila* 'forgiveness', sometimes shortened to simply *nichole*; *Morgenstern* 'prison' < *מורא* *mora* 'fear' + *שטר* *šetar* 'official document'; created as if equivalent to German 'morning star' (!); *Peizaddik* 'police' < *פה* *pe* 'mouth' + *צדיק* *šaddiq* 'righteous one'.

Rotwelsch also employs an occasional Hebrew phrase from the realm of ritual and religion with changed meaning. A good illustration is *Manischtanne* (cf. *מה נשתנה* *ma ništanna* 'how is this [night] different', used in the Passover Seder) to connote 'overly clever, nit-picking'. A particularly felicitous usage is *Achbrosch* 'rascal, crook', a byform of *Ahasver(os)*, the name attributed to 'the wandering Jew' figure in European lore (which in turn derives from the name *אחשוורוש* *'ahašweroš* 'Ahasuerus', king of Persia in the Esther story)—though the Rotwelsch term also evokes the combination of *עכבר* *'akbar* 'mouse' + *ראש* *roš* 'head', as a calque on the German pejorative expression *Mauskopf* (Wolf 1956:31–32).

While technically derived from Aramaic, one also should note *Nafke* 'whore' (cf. Aramaic *נפקת בר* *naḥqat bar* 'one (f) who goes out in the wild', hence 'whore, prostitute').

Other designations of Rotwelsch, or perhaps slightly different dialects of the language, include two terms based on Hebrew expressions: (a) *Keimisch* (attested in 1475), based on *Keim*, i.e., *חיים* *ḥayyim* 'life', but also the common Jewish personal name *Chaim/Hayim*; and (b) *Lachoudisch/Lekoudesch* (19th century, especially Franconia), derived from *Lochne-Kodesch*, i.e., *לשון הקודש* *lešon ha-qodeš* 'the holy tongue', traditionally applied to Hebrew in Jewish sources → *Lekoudesch*.

Finally, one should observe that, quite remarkably, many of these usages suggest a relatively sophisticated knowledge of Hebrew among the speakers of Rotwelsch. One is not surprised to find *Ponim* 'face' in the language (the word is, after all, used in Yiddish), but it is rather striking to find also *Patzuf* used for 'face'. The latter word derives from *פריצוף* *paršuf* 'face, profile' (see above), though this term is limited to learned Hebrew (it is a post-biblical Hebrew word, borrowed from Greek,

which appears only once in the Mishna, for example). Similarly, words such as נֹכַח *noḳah* ‘one who is positioned before or opposite’, whence *Nuche* ‘mouth, face’ (see above), and שְׁבוּשׁ *šibbuš* ‘mistake’ (the root on which this noun is based also occurs only once in the Mishna), whence *Schibbusch* ‘mistake’ (again, see above), require quite an advanced knowledge of Hebrew texts and sources.

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## Russia

This entry treats Jewish and Christian use of Hebrew in areas of Eurasia loosely and sometimes anachronistically termed ‘Russian’ due to the modern expansion of political boundaries. As throughout the world, Jews in Russia utilized Hebrew for prayer, study, and correspondence, while also adopting local languages. Medieval translations from Hebrew to Slavic influenced Russian Orthodox Christians and arguably the heretical ‘Judaizers’. Monks compiled Hebrew-Russian glossaries. In modern times, the renaissance of Hebrew emanated largely from within the Russian Empire.

### I. FROM ANTIQUITY TO 1772

Beginning in the late centuries B.C.E., Jews settled along the southern fringes of the future Russian Empire. Ancient Jewish communities

existed throughout the northern Black and Azov Sea coastal territories, including Crimea and the Caucasus, and extended beyond the Caspian Sea along the Silk Road (present-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Linguistic reality in this region reflected Jewish life to the south: Black Sea Jews from Greek *poleis* communicated primarily in Greek; those living farther east communicated in dialects of Persian (including Hebrew-influenced ‘hybrid’ languages, such as Juhuri or Judeo-Tat and Bukhori or Judeo-Persian) (Cohn-Sherbok 1996:36, 63, 67, 69; Altshuler 2002:17; Barnavi et al. 2002:29, 57, 118). Yet one also finds evidence of Hebrew usage. In Chersonesus Taurica (southwestern Crimea), inscriptions bear witness to the presence of Jews or Jewish-Christians with a knowledge of Hebrew ca. 2nd–4th centuries C.E. Ancient gravestones with Jewish symbols (menorah, shofar, lulav, etrog) have been discovered in the Crimean and Taman peninsulas and in Georgia; several include Hebrew epitaphs (Garkavi 1865; Dubnow 1916:1.13–18; Brook 2006:88–90; Shapira 2010a:13–16, 33 n. 1, 34 n. 7). Part of the inscription on an ancient sarcophagus found near Merv reads: יֵעֻבֵּי בֶר יֹסֵף בֶּר יַעֲקֹב *yosef bar ya‘aqob* ‘Joseph son of Jacob’. The Old Georgian Bible appears to have been edited with reference to a Hebrew text; arguably some portions may have been translated directly from Hebrew. Loan words also entered from Hebrew into classical Armenian (Shapira 2010c; Lerner 2010) (→ Armenian, Hebrew Loanwords in).

In the 8th–10th centuries, the Khazar khaganate dominated most of the northern Black and Caspian Sea region (Gilbert 1993:24–25; Cohn-Sherbok 1996:75, 92). Its Turkic ruling class and an indeterminate subset of the population converted to Judaism; immigrants fleeing Christian persecution in Byzantium further supplemented the region’s pre-existent Jewish communities. Khazaria nonetheless remained ethnically and religiously quite diverse: its legal system included Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and pagan judges in a set proportion (Dubnow 1916:1.19–29; Noonan 2001). Golb (2005:483) has noted: “The only internal (written) sources concerning the Khazars... are texts preserved in Hebrew”. This is currently true with the exception of a few Turkic runes within Hebrew documents and some coins with Arabic inscriptions. The most famous of the Hebrew sources is the 10th-century