

The Culture of Yiddish: An Introduction

01:563:245:01 (crosslisted as 01:470:280:01)

Spring 2024

Tuesday / Thursday, 2:00-3:20 PM Miller Hall 116

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Office Hours: Tuesday, 11:00 AM – 12:00N; Thursday 1:00-2:00 PM; or by appointment

- This course fulfills Core Curriculum Learning Goal AHq: “Understand the nature of human languages and their speakers.”
- This course counts as an elective for the Jewish Studies major and minor and for the Holocaust Studies minor.

Course description:

This course will provide students with an overview of the language and culture of Yiddish, the traditional vernacular of Ashkenazic Jews for over 1,000 years. Students will learn about the distinctive structure of Yiddish as a fusion language and about the multilingual nature of its speakers. The course will continue with an overview of key areas of Yiddish cultural activity from the early modern period to the present, including religious life, political activism, secular literature, press, and the performing arts. Finally, the course will consider the role of Yiddish both during the Holocaust—when half of the speech community was murdered and its European cultural center destroyed—and afterwards, as both Jews and others forge new relations with the language. All course readings and materials will be in English. No prior knowledge of linguistics, of Yiddish or any other language, or of Jewish history or religion is required.

Course learning goals:

- Students will acquire an overview of the history of Yiddish language from its origins to the present and of the variety of its uses in Jewish culture.
- Through the case of Yiddish, students will learn about different notions of the interrelation of language, culture, and peoplehood.
- Students will learn how to analyze primary texts related to Yiddish language and culture.

Course requirements:

- Class preparation and participation: 30% of grade
- Seven short writing assignments: 50% of grade
- Final examination (take-home essay): 20% of grade

Technology requirements

Students will need access to the internet and to a computer or other device on which they can watch and listen to video presentations, access readings, and complete writing assignments. Please visit the Rutgers Student Tech Guide page for resources available to all students: <https://it.rutgers.edu/technology-guide/students/#new-brunswick>. For tech help with Canvas, please visit <https://it.rutgers.edu/help-support>.

NOTE: Students must do their own work and must cite properly all outside sources (readings, media works, websites, etc.) consulted in preparing written assignments. Students should review the university policy on Academic Integrity at <http://nbacademicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>. Failure to comply with this policy can result in failure of the course or more severe penalties.

On the course Canvas site, in the module labeled Useful Documents, please review the following documents:

- Syllabus Addenda, for information about Disability Accommodations, Academic Integrity Policy, and Student Support and Mental Wellness, etc.
- Grading Rubric
- Guidelines for writing assignments.

Course Schedule

Students will receive weekly announcements by email detailing the work to be completed for the following week.

NOTE: This schedule is subject to change. Please check your Rutgers email regularly for announcements of upcoming assignments as well as any changes in schedule.

[§] = Book to purchase. All other readings will be on the course Canvas site.

1/16-1/23. Introduction: General background on Yiddish

- Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, chapters 1, 2

1/30-2/6. Early Yiddish

- *Akeydas Yitskhok* (The Binding of Isaac)
- Excerpts from *Mayse-bukh* (Book of Tales)
- Sample *tkhines* (prayers)
- Excerpts from *Tsene-rene* (Yiddish translation of Bible and commentaries)
- Assignment #1 due 2/12

2/8-2/15. Yiddish in the 19th Century

- Hasidic Yiddish: *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*
- Yiddish and the Haskalah: I.M. Dik's "The Panic"
- Learning to write Yiddish correspondence: *brivnshtelers*
- Assignment #2 due 2/21

2/20-2/22. Modern Yiddish Literature

- Sholem Aleichem, selections from "Railroad Stories"
- Y. L. Peretz, "Bontshe shvayg," "If Not Higher," "The Three Gifts"
- Assignment #3 due 2/29

2/27-3/19. Yiddish in America

- Poems by Morris Rosenfeld, Dovid Edelstadt, Yehoash
- Film: *Free Voice of Labor* (1980)
- Learning Yiddish in America: Holiday stories
- Selections from *Bintl briv*, the advice column of the Jewish Daily Forward
- Film: *American Matchmaker* (1938)
- Assignment #4 due 3/8
- Assignment #5 due 3/25

3/21-3/26. The YIVO Institute

- "Just What is Jewish Ethnography?"
- Youth Autobiographies: "Esther" and "G.W."

3/28-4/18. Yiddish and the Holocaust

- Yankev Glatshteyn, *Emil and Karl* [\$] ISBN: 978-0312373870
- Film: *Our Children* (1947)
- Excerpts from *yizker-bikher* (memorial books)
- Yiddish songs of the Holocaust
- I. B. Singer, "The Last Demon," "Yiddish Language and Culture"
- Yiddish in video interviews with Holocaust survivors
- Assignment #6 due 4/12
- Assignment #7 due 4/22

4/23-4/25. Yiddish after World War II

- Shandler, "Life Expectancy," in *Yiddish: Biography of a Language*
- Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, selections from *What Stillness Illuminated*
- Stories by Frume Halpern

Final exam: take-home essay due 5/5