



Michael Wex

Born to Kvetch
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Q: You've described Yiddish as "a language that has turned complaining into an art form." What accounts for this linguistic phenomenon?

A: I think that the will to complain can be traced back to two separate but closely related sources. The first is the decidedly less than sunny disposition of the Jewish people, as outlined in the Bible and other formative religious works. The basic plot of the Bible is simple: God grants the Jews an incredible boon—freedom from slavery, victory over overwhelmingly superior enemies—to which the Jews respond with ingratitude and even contempt. God gets upset and punishes them, the chastened Jews repent, God does them another favor and the Jews respond with ingratitude and contempt.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jewish people have had no chance to respond with ingratitude. The messianic era hasn't come and we're still in exile—a continuing state of not getting the one thing that we really want. Without that, nothing—no matter how good it might be on its own—is really good enough; everything short of messianic redemption is severely lacking, and we're enough like our ancestors to enjoy pointing this out. We started complaining as soon as we were freed from slavery. Exile made sure that Yiddish would never lack important things to complain about, while daily life brought the kvetch down to earth.

Q: Can you discuss a bit more about how klal-shprakh has changed the complexion of Yiddish spoken today?

A: Klal-shprakh has had a tremendous effect on the Yiddish used and taught in universities and non-ultra-Orthodox schools, in which it has become the authorized "correct" form of the language. As the only Yiddish familiar to any of the students and most of the teachers—few of whom are native speakers—it's become the de facto standard against which all other forms of Yiddish are judged. This sometimes leads to situations in which the Yiddish of native-speakers is pronounced deficient or defective by people and who have never lived in communities in which it's the main vehicle of spoken communication and who are often unable to follow it.

There's nothing wrong with klal-shprakh per se; the problem—which can hardly be blamed on the people who teach it—is that the standard language was meant as an adjunct to the day-to-day dialectal forms of Yiddish spoken all over the world. It's great for textbooks, contracts, and coming up with universally recognized and accepted neologisms (e.g., blitspost, which means e-mail), but it doesn't make much room for the juicier and more trenchant modes of expression that make Yiddish-speakers love the language so much. It's colorless, and deliberately so: great for cereal boxes and insurance policies, but unable to take the place of those rapidly vanishing dialects full of things that teachers can't stand. I use it when I need to speak a nice Protestant Yiddish.

Q: What is the greatest threat to the ongoing evolution of Yiddish as a contemporary language?

A: I think that the biggest threat is the difficulty in finding a reason for non-Hasidim to speak Yiddish. Most North American Jews don't live very differently from their non-Jewish friends and neighbors; most North American gentiles have no compelling desire to become Jewish. So what's wrong with English, if it can express everything we need to say? We need to find attitudes and ways of thinking that simply aren't present in English. One of the things that I've tried to do in *Born to Kvetch* is to provide a rationale for the continuing use and development of the language by Jews and non-Jews alike.

Q: Why is Yiddish hard-wired for humor, and to what extent does this aspect of the language account for your use of a jocular tone in *Born to Kvetch*?

A: Like any language or argot that's designed to be incomprehensible to outsiders, Yiddish is based on an inversion of expected meanings and values, the circumcision of German (and general Christian) cultural assumptions that's mentioned in the book. Turning things upside down is the basis of a good deal of humor, and ironic inversion lies at the root of Yiddish. While such irony can be said to originate in the Bible and Talmud, it reached its flowering with the refusal of Jews in medieval Germany to let the German language get in the way of their fundamentally Talmudic way of thinking. When our word for "today" is their word for "tonight," the boffo yucks can't be far behind. I've tried to use a similarly jocular tone in *Born to Kvetch* to help make the material accessible at the same time as it mirrors the tone and approach of so much the language that it's describing.