



Born to Kvetch

By Michael Wex
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Introduction

As the main spoken language of the Jews for more than a thousand years, Yiddish has had plenty to lament and to celebrate. Its phrases and expressions paint a comprehensive picture of the mindset that enabled the Jews of Europe to survive a millennium of unrelenting persecution: they just never stopped *kvetching*—about God, gentiles, children, food, and everything (and anything) else.

Born to Kvetch looks at the ingredients that went into this buffet of disenchantment and examines how they produced an almost limitless supply of language, from striking idioms to withering curses. This is no boke mayse (cock-and-bull story) from a *khokhem be-layle* (idiot, literally, a "sage at night" when no one's looking), but a serious yet fun and funny look at a language that both shaped and was shaped by those who spoke it. Through his comprehensive history of this fascinating tongue, Michael Wex offers a moving and inspiring portrait of a people, and a language, in exile.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do the origins of Yiddish relate to Judaism and Jewish culture and to what extent is Yiddish a repudiation of all things gentile, or non-Jewish?
2. When Michael Wex writes: "Yiddish is a language that likes to argue with everybody about everything—and to do so all the time, even when it's pretending not to," what does he mean?
3. From what three major sources are most Yiddish idioms and expressions drawn, and how do these sources inform the general tone of Yiddish?
4. How does *klal-shprakh*, the standard language of Yiddish developed in the 1920s and 1930s, compare to such regional dialect variations as *poylish* and *litvish*, and how would you characterize its role in contemporary Yiddish?
5. How does the "vocabulary of exclusion" in Yiddish apply particularly to food and its preparation and consumption?
6. In what ways has Yiddish absorbed the essential tension in Jewish religious life between living as the Torah commands and living solely for one's self?
7. How does the tendency of Yiddish speakers to avoid seeming overly enthusiastic about anything relate to their longstanding history of social and cultural oppression?
8. How does a *kvetch* differ from a curse, or *klote*, and what do these two linguistic forms have in common?
9. "There is almost no phase of human life that Yiddish takes entirely seriously." What accounts for the comical or playful impulse behind Yiddish?
10. Of the many aspects of Yiddish language Michael Wex examines in *Born to Kvetch*, which was the most interesting or intriguing to you, and why?

About the Author

Michael Wex is a novelist, instructor, translator and performer. He has been hailed as "a Yiddish national treasure," and is one of the leading lights in the current revival of Yiddish, lecturing widely on Yiddish and Jewish culture. He lives and *kvetches* in Toronto.