Oberlin College/Spring 2016
Jewish Studies/History 223

Introduction to Modern Yiddish Culture

Dr. Gil Ribak

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Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:00-4:00 PM, or by appointment

Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30-10:50 AM (King 323)

Course Description:
Yiddish has been the language of Ashkenazi Jews for nearly a millennium. By 1939 it was the language of approximately 11 million Jews, comprising more than two-thirds of world Jewry. Since the early Middle Ages Yiddish had been intimately interwoven into Jewish life and closely involved in the evolution of Jewish religious practices, customs and folkways. In more recent
times Yiddish served as the vehicle for the proliferation of an array of movements such as Hasidism, nationalism, and socialism. As Jewish immigration to Western Europe, North and South America, the Land of Israel, Australia, and South Africa created new centers of Yiddish-speaking populations, Yiddish educational institutions, literature, theater and press developed and achieved a high level of creativity and ingenuity.

Yet the emergence of modern Yiddish culture was highly contested, reflecting the vicissitudes of modern Jewish identity and internal debates about the future of the Jewish people. The course is an introduction to the modern Yiddish civilization, serving as a historical overview of the major developments, figures, and movements in modern Yiddish culture, especially from the early 19th century to the present. We will discuss the vicissitudes of modern Jewish identity and internal debates about the future of the Jewish people. The course contents include readings (in English translation) of modern Yiddish thought, literature, and cinema.

**Course Requirements:**

This class requires attendance, preparation, and active participation.

**Attendance:** Attendance in lecture is required and constitutes 10% of your final grade. I will take attendance each time and any student who misses THREE or more lectures throughout the semester will get an “F” grade (for those 10% of the final grade). Any student who misses **25% or more** of the course’s total number of lectures will FAIL the class. If extenuating circumstances such as illness force a student to miss one or more classes, please email me. The student remains responsible for the material covered during her/his absence. A physician’s note is required in such a case. If a circumstance hinders your ability to attend regularly or fulfill other requirements, please see me as soon as possible. **Tardiness** is disruptive to the class and unacceptable. If a student is tardy (arriving more than TWO minutes after the beginning of class) THREE times, it will constitute one unexcused absence. The same goes for leaving class before it ends.

**Preparation:** I cannot overemphasize the importance of your reading assignments. You are expected to read ALL the assigned materials in advance of class, and be prepared to discuss them. A failure to read the assigned materials will affect your final grade. If a class session is cancelled for any reason, e.g., inclement weather, prepare as usual for that missed class day, and prepare the next class reading for its scheduled time: in any case you should stay current with the syllabus. I may examine your level of preparation even unexpectedly (e.g. with a pop quiz).

**Participation:** informed participation in class is required and will affect your grade. I welcome your *informed* input during class, and may call on you.
Final Grade Breakdown:

Attendance – 10%

Participation, preparation, oral report (each student must deliver one report in class and submit a write up), and possible pop quizzes – 25% (combined)

Midterm exam – 20%

Term paper – 20%

Final exam – 25%.

Please note: late assignments will lose 10 points for every day late.

>98% A+
95-98% A
91-94% A-
87-90% B+
83-86% B
78-82% B-
74-77% C+
69-73% C
65-68% C-
60-64% D
Below 60% F
Standards of Student Conduct:

The use of computers in class is STRICTLY FORBIDDEN. The ONLY exception would be students who can provide an authorization from the learning disabilities office (http://new.oberlin.edu/office/disability-services/documentation/) detailing a learning disability that requires the use of a computer. The use of texting, cell phones and pagers is also strictly forbidden. Students violating these rules will be asked to leave the class for the day, and will have an absence recorded for that date.

Standards of Academic Integrity and the Honor Code:

As all courses in Oberlin, this course operates under the Honor Code, including but not limited to, prohibition of plagiarism. Students are responsible for understanding and adhering to the Code. Information about the Honor Code is available on the College website and the Honor Code committee.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the appropriation and subsequent passing off of another’s ideas or words as one’s own. If the words or ideas of another are used, acknowledgement of the original source must be made through recognized referencing practices. Use of another’s ideas or words must be properly acknowledged as follows:

(1) Direct Quotation: Any use of direct quotation must be acknowledged by footnote citation and by either quotation marks or proper indentation and spacing.

(2) Paraphrase: If another’s ideas are borrowed in whole or in part and are merely recast in the student’s own words, proper acknowledgement must, nonetheless, be made. A footnote or proper internal citation must follow the paraphrased material.

For more information, see http://www.oberlin.edu/library/avoiding-plagiarism.html

Required books:

David E. Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture

Joachim Neugroschel (ed.), No Star Too Beautiful: Yiddish Stories from 1382 to the Present
The assigned books are available for purchase at the campus bookstore. They are also available on reserve at the Mudd Library. ALL the other readings are available online via Blackboard. There are no excused failures to obtain the readings.

# Primary or literary sources (online)
* Scholarly sources (online)

## Lectures and Reading

(Note: weekly readings are due on the FIRST meeting of the week)


* Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 1-5, 175-181

**(Thu., Feb. 4): The Emergence of Hasidic Yiddish Culture and the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) Movement**


Dov Ber ben Shmuel of Linets, From “In Praise of the Baal-Shem-Tov” (1815), Neugroschel (ed.), *No Star Too Beautiful*, 101-104

Rabbi Nakhman of Braslev, “A Tale of a King’s Son Who Was Switched at Birth”, Neugroschel (ed.), *No Star Too Beautiful*, 121-137


# Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Fishke the Lame* (translated by Gerald Stillman), 17-88
(Tue., Feb. 9 and Thu., Feb. 11): The Grandfather of Modern Yiddish Literature – Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitch)

[The movie *Fishke der Krumer* will be shown in class]

# Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Fishke the Lame*, 89-216

* Gershon Shaked, "’A Groan from a Broken Heart’: Mendele’s *Fishke the Lame* as a Demand for Responsibility”, *The New Tradition*, 194-215

(Tue., Feb. 16 and Thu., Feb. 18): The Classic Writers – Sholem Aleichem (Sholem N. Rabinovitch) and Yitsik Leybush Peretz


# Peretz, “Bontshe Shvayg”, Ruth R. Wisse (ed.), *I. L. Peretz Reader*, 146-152

# Sholem Aleichem, “Dreyfus in Kasrilevke”, Irving Howe and Ruth R. Wisse (eds.), *The Best of Sholem Aleichem*, 111-114; and “The Clock that Struck Thirteen”, *Selected Stories*, 89-96


(Tue., Feb. 23 and Thu., Feb. 25): Politics and Language – Nationalism and Socialism


# Simon Dubnov, “From Jargon to Yiddish”, Joseph Leftwich (ed.), *Great Yiddish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, 519-527


(Tue., March 1, and Thu., March 3): Language Disputes – Hebraists vs. Yiddishists

Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, 15-17, 83-113

# “Czernowitz Conference of the Yiddish Language”, Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz (eds.), The Jew in the Modern World, 404-405


# Ahad Ha-am, excerpt from “The Spiritual Revival”, Selected Essays, 279-285

(Tue., March 8, and Thu., March 10): In the New World – a Mega-Shtetl on the Hudson?

(Midterm exam: Thursday, March 10)

[The movie Uncle Moses will be shown in class]


# Sholem Aleichem, Motl the Cantor’s Son, 264-268

# Yehoash, “Lynching”, Jules Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 142

(Tue., March 15, and Thu., March 17): Yiddish Theater and Yiddish Press

# A collection of letters from “A Bintl Briv” (a bundle of letters), Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 298-308

* Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers, 518-554


March 19-27 – Spring break
(Tue., March 29, and Thu., March 31): Yiddish and the Jewish Labor Movement in America


(Tue., April 5, and Thu., April 7): The Soviet Experience – The Ramifications of Stalinism

(Term Paper is due on Thursday, April 7)


(Tue., April 12, and Thu., April 14): Khurbm (The Holocaust)

[The movie Our Children will be shown in class]

Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, 139-153


# Sholem Asch, One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians, 44-52

# Kadya Molodowsky, “Merciful God”, Kramer and Lishinsky (eds.), The Last Lullaby, 208-209


(Tue., April 19, and Thu., April 21): Postwar American Yiddish Culture

Fishman, The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, 126-137


# Cynthia Ozick, “Envy, Or Yiddish in America”, Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 858-896

# H. Leyvik, “To America”, Chametzky (ed.), Jewish American Literature, 287-289

(Tue., April 26, and Thu., April 28): Yiddish in Ultra-Orthodox Communities

[The movie A Gesheft will be shown in class]

# Excerpt from Rabbi Jerahmeel Israel Isaac Domb, The Transformation: The Case of the Neturei Karta, 98-103


(Tue., May 3, and Thu., May 5): An End or a Renaissance?


* Jeffrey Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture, 155-176
* Jon G. Auerbach, “They Can't Spell It, Can't Pronounce It and Don't Get It --- So Why Does Every Tom, Dick and Herschel Use Yiddish?” Wall Street Journal, June 2, 1998

**Final Exam: Thursday, May 12 @ 2:00-4:00 PM.**

No early or late exams will be permitted.