

## Adonai Sifatai Tiftach – Jewish Languages Around The World

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### Goals

1. To expose program participants to the concept of Jewish languages
2. To expose program participants the impact that geographic movement has had impacted how Jews speak and write
3. To help program participants understand how Hebrew is a unifying language of the Jewish people

### Objectives

1. Program participants will be able to discuss a little about three different Jewish languages: Yiddish, Ladino and Judeo-Arabic
2. Program participants will be able to describe how Jewish history has impacted Jewish languages
3. Program participants will be explain some of the roles of Hebrew in tying together Jews in the past, today and in the future

### Timeline:

- 00:00 – 00:05 Introduction of concept of Jewish languages  
00:05 – 00:15 Brief history lesson to show movement of Jews over past 2000 years  
00:15 – 00:30 Rotation One  
00:30 – 00:45 Rotation Two  
00:45 – 01:00 Rotation Three  
01:00 – 01:15 Discussion of Hebrew as unifying language of the Jewish People

### Materials

A copy of the introductory statement with the English paragraph with Yiddish words  
A map of the world  
Box of thumbtacks or straight pins  
Some yarn or large arrows to be put on the map  
Tape to attach the yarn or arrows  
Copies of the Yiddish dictionary  
Copies of Dona in Yiddish  
Copies of the Nani Nani lyrics  
A CD of Nani Nani (this can be burned from the file on the website)  
A CD player  
Writing utensils and paper for Judeo-Arabic activity

### Detailed Procedure

#### Step 1: Trigger/Set Induction (Five minutes)

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Group leader reads the following:

And now, a statement in perfectly good English one might hear in America these days:

The other day I **schlepped** up to **shmooze** with a friend, a real **klutz**, if you know what I mean, but someone who loves to **kibitz**. We're **noshing** some **bagels** when he begins to **kvetch** about the **shmutz** on his shirt. It seems that his **khakamemie** cleaner is a real **shmendrick**, and a **gunnuf** at that, charging some much and not cleaning the stain – what **chutzpah**. So I said to him, "What a **facakta** situation - you shouldn't wear nice shirts when you know you're going to **shvitz**. Your good clothes are going to turn into **shmates**." He says, "I'm so **fekleempt**. My old workout clothes have so many holes that you can see my **pupik** and my **tuchis**. I end up wearing a **mishmash** of clothes." He goes on and on until I think I'm going to **plotz**. I guess that's his **shtick** these days. My friend may be

a **nudnik** but he's also a real **mensch**. So, what are you going to do with **meshugana** friends but let them share their **tzurus** with you?

Group leader then asks the following questions:

1. How many people understood the entire statement
2. How many Yiddish words (24), most that have made their way into English?
3. Think of other languages that have impacted American English (burrito, spaghetti, entrepreneur), along with the impact that life in America has had on other languages (L'Big Mac).
4. This program is going to look at how Jews moved throughout the world, taking on new languages and making them our own, in the same way that we brought so much Yiddish into American English

## **Step 2: Movement Through Time and Space (Ten minutes)**

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Group then turns to a world map that has been attached to the wall. On the map, the group leader will point out eight key movements in Jewish history to show where the Jewish community moved over the past 2,000 years. This is done by either putting pin and yarn on the maps or by attaching large arrows on the map along the following points:

1. First Big Move: 200 CE – from Israel to Babylonia (Today's Iraq) – Jewish community here began to be impacted by both Eastern Aramaic and Arabic (7<sup>th</sup> Century)
2. Second Big Move: 300 CE – From Israel to Italy – Jewish community moves northward with expansion of Roman Empire into central and western Europe
3. Third Big Move: 700 - 1000 CE – From Babylonia to Iberian Peninsula (Spain/Portugal) – Jewish community moved westward with spread of Islam
4. Fourth Big Move: 1100 – 14<sup>00</sup> CE – From central and western Europe to central and eastern Europe – the expulsion of Ashkenazi Jews to Poland
5. Fifth Big Move: 1492 CE – From Spain and Portugal to the Turkish Ottoman Empire (primarily to the Mediterranean Basin) and in a small part to South and North America and Holland
6. Sixth Big Move: 1600 – 1700 CE – From Poland eastward to Russian, Ukraine and Lithuania
7. Seventh Big Move: Late 1800's – Early 1900's – From Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland to United States, some movement to central and western Europe, and some movement to Israel
8. Eighth Big Move: 1948 – 1952: From former Ottoman Empire and Europe to Israel, with large groups coming from the FSU and Ethiopia in the 1990's

B. Each participant should then take either pins or stickers and place on the map where their Jewish family is from.

C. The group leader then asks the following questions:

1. How does this little lesson in Jewish migration help us understand how Jews living in the Ukraine spoke High Old German and Jews living in Turkey spoke the Spanish of Cervantes? **Jews were exposed to these languages for a long time and ended up speaking them as a main language that then moved eastern with them**
2. Given what we've just learned, why do we think of Yiddish as the main Jewish language besides Hebrew? **This is where most North American Jews trace their lineage**
3. Why do you think we are fairly unaware of Judeo-Arabic as a main language of the Jews? **Those communities ended up never making it out of the Mediterranean basin.**

## **Step 3: Learning a Little About other Jewish Languages (Fifteen minutes per activity; Five minute wrap-up)**

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*(With a large group, break into three different rotations; with a smaller group, select one, two or three of the following activities to do together. Each group should have a group leader who can facilitate program activity)*

A. Rotation 1: Yiddish Theater

**Group Leader reads the following:** In the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, we begin to see the development of a new Jewish language – Yiddish, a language that uses Old High German as its base, peppered with Hebrew and Aramaic. This language continued to stay with the Jews of Western and Central Europe as they moved from what today is Northern France and Germany into Poland and then on eastward into Russia and the Ukraine. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two-thirds of the Jewish world spoke Yiddish. Yiddish theater reflected one of cultural highlights of this community in central and Eastern Europe, with Warsaw boasting over 30 Yiddish theater groups immediately prior to WWII (Jews made up a third of the population of the Polish capitol). New York also boasted a number of Yiddish theater groups that continue to function today, although with a much more limited audience.

**Activity:** Take a copy of the dictionary of Yiddish words (attached) and create a five-minute “Yiddish” theater piece that will be performed by the group for everyone else. While much of the Yiddish Theater was comic, there were many plays that focused on the hard life of the Jewish community in Europe. If you wish, your play can also contain the Yiddish song “Dona Dona” (attached).

B. Rotation 2: Ladino Music

**Group Leader reads the following:** The linguistic history of the Jews accurately mirrors our dispersion over the world. This is certainly reflected in the six Jewish languages that developed which were based on the Latin as the Jews made their way into southern Europe. The majority of these unique languages disappeared as Jews moved to new communities. For example, Zarphatic (Judeo-French), which became extinct after expulsion of Jews from France in 1394, was replaced with Yiddish. Yiddish preserves some remnants of Zarphatic; the Yiddish word for saying Grace after meals, *bench*, is based the Zarphatic word from the Latin *benedictio*. The main language from this group that continues until today is Ladino. This language moved with the Spanish Jews out of Spain and Portugal and continued to be the main language of the Sephardic communities of the western Mediterranean, the Balkans, Turkey and Greece. Today, while the community that speaks Ladino continues to shrink, much of the richness of this language continues to be treasured in the form of Ladino music. The Ladino speaking community was quite affected by rich history of Spanish poetry and the created a vast treasure of secular and religious poetry that was often set to music. Today, there are a number of centers that focus on recording and preserving this body of Jewish creativity.

**Activity:** Play the Ladino lullaby *Nani Nani (The Cradle Song)* (Music file, words and translation attached). Listen first without the words. Then examine how the Ladino is written two different ways: using Hebrew characters and Latin characters. Then listen a second time with the words. After listening the second time, share some of your thoughts with one another using the following questions:

1. Prior to looking at the words, what images were conjured up by the sounds of the music and the sounds of the words?
2. Once you looked at the words, did any of these images change?
3. What is the difference between listening to Jewish music when you know the meaning of the words and when you do not know the meaning?
4. How does the experience of listening to a language you do not understand fully change when you hear something in that language set to music?
5. How does this impact your own thinking about Jewish music, especially music in Hebrew, either during prayer or during song sessions?

C. Rotation 3: Aravic (Judeo-Arabic) Texts

**Group Leader reads the following:** Judeo-Arabic, like Yiddish and Ladino, was written utilizing the Hebrew alphabet. Therefore, anyone who could read Hebrew would be able to at least decode these languages today. However, the languages themselves tended to be much more similar to the language spoken in the non-Jewish community with a few additions of Hebrew and Aramaic. Non-Jews who were unfamiliar with the Hebrew alphabet were also unable to read Jewish books written in these special Jewish languages. Moses Maimonides (Rambam) was very aware of this phenomenon when he selected languages for his various important texts. He chose to write his Mishnah Torah, a code for Jewish practice and life, in simple Hebrew so that the average person in the Jewish community would know how to carry out God’s mitzvot without having to know the complex thinking and difficult Aramaic of the Talmud. However, when he wrote what is considered by most scholars to be the most important work of philosophy written by a Jew, the Guide to the Perplexed, he selected a very different language. This text, which he finished around 1200 CE, was written in Judeo-Arabic; non-Jews could not access the text because of the Hebrew characters; Jews most familiar with the Hebrew and Aramaic of traditional talmudic texts could not access the language. He was therefore able to write for a very small audience who would be sufficiently grounded in intellectual discourse to engage in this text that attempts to combine Aristotelian philosophy and revealed religion. By selecting this special Jewish language, Maimonides was able to create a setting where such questions as the very nature of God, the role of free will and determination, and the centrality of rationality could be explored by a handful of the elite and not shake the belief of the general Jewish masses.

**Activity:** Each person in the group should write out a single paragraph that uses the English language and Hebrew characters. The paragraphs should then be passed around to one another in the group for individual decoding. Know that when Hebrew was brought back as a spoken language, a decision was made to create a few new Hebrew letters to present certain western sounds that had not existed in the Hebrew language. If you need to use some of these new letters, they are as follows:

For the sound “ch” as in *chocolate*, use a tzadi with a chupchik:

For the sound of “th” as in *thorough*, use a tet with a chupchik:

For the sound of “j” as in the French *Jacque*, use a zayin with a chupchik:

For the sound of “j” as in *Jeep*, use the gimel with a chupchik:



#### D. Wrap-up of Rotations

Depending upon your group and the time you have, you can have each group present its mini-Yiddish Theater piece or you can move right into the concluding step that looks at the main Jewish language today – Hebrew.

### Step Four: Hebrew as a Unifier (Fifteen minutes)

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**Group Leader reads the following:** Although Hebrew has a long history in the land of Israel during Temple times, Hebrew slowly transitioned from a spoken language to a written language under the influence of Aramaic. That is why, for example, the Kaddish prayer is written in Aramaic, the vernacular of the Jewish community at the end of the Second Temple Period. Despite efforts of Yehuda haNasi (head of the Jewish community in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century in Israel) to bring back Hebrew as the main Jewish language, it shifted into serving as the second language of Jews, used almost exclusively for prayer and religious writings and in some instances to communicate with Jews from other communities. In the Medieval period, Hebrew also served as an international language of business; merchants from one part of Europe would turn to the Jewish community to write letters in Hebrew to be sent to merchants elsewhere. When the letter would arrive, a Jew in that community would translate it into the local language for a fee. While not extensively used in speech, Hebrew was not really a “dead language” in that its written form continued to develop and be influenced by the changing outside world. New words added in scientific writings and responsa and old words were given new meanings. The languages being used by Jews - both Jewish and non-Jewish languages, also influenced Hebrew. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with the development of Zionism and the desire to recreate a Jewish nationalism with all of the trappings of a nation, it became a major goal to return Hebrew to its fully spoken form as a modern language. Over the past one hundred years, this experiment has been highly successful; in fact, one finds today that more than 50% of Jewish kindergarteners have Hebrew as their mother tongue.

#### Discussion lead by Group Leader:

1. How does Hebrew connect you to other Jews, both from the past and around the world?
2. What are some of the reasons the Jews of North America should also make certain that in addition to English, they have fluency in Hebrew?
3. If we only have an hour or two per week to dedicate to learning Hebrew, should we focus on the written Hebrew of our textual past and our present prayers or should we focus on spoken Hebrew?
4. How does using a Jewish language change your connection to Judaism?
5. What new insights about yourself, your history and the various Jewish languages that we've discussed today impacted your own sense of Jewishness?