

mixtures of cultural groups continue up to our own day, but on a much larger scale than ever before.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing until the present, the traditional geographic pattern of the Diaspora outlined in this chapter changed totally. These changes were caused by economic opportunity, improved transportation, the horrors of the Holocaust, and the remarkable rebirth of the State of Israel. The areas that had the largest Jewish populations 150 years ago, now generally have very small or no Jewish communities. The largest Jewish communities today are located in areas where there was little or no Jewish population in 1850: the United States, Israel, the Russian Republic, France, England, and Argentina. Even in Russia, seemingly an exception, the areas of Jewish settlement today center in Moscow and St. Petersburg, both areas outside the Pale of Settlement, which lasted until 1917. While the traditional pattern of Jewish settlement coincided with traditional patterns of culture, expressed through language, food and costume, the overwhelming majority of Jews in the new population centers no longer follow most of these traditional patterns or retain only a few symbolic remnants of them. Although Jewish life continues, the old Diaspora communities have mostly come to an end.



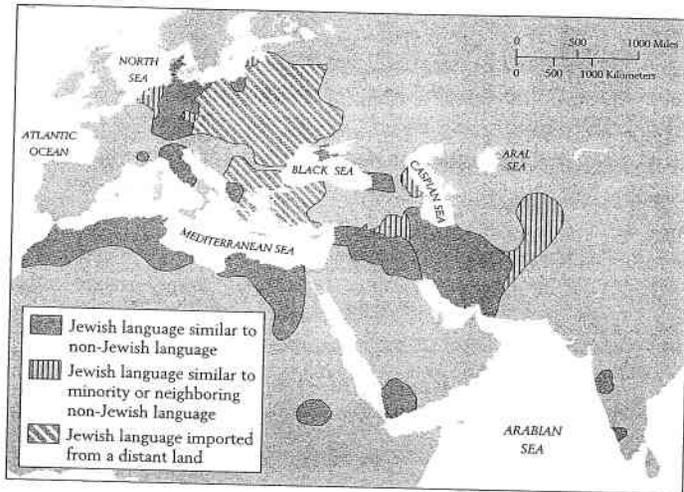
Jewish Languages



Similarities and Differences



WHAT IS A JEWISH LANGUAGE? THIS IS A SIMPLE QUESTION WITH A COMPLICATED answer. A language doesn't become Jewish just because some Jews speak it. Otherwise English would be the most widespread Jewish language today. Throughout most of their dispersion, Jews have been multilingual. It was not merely that they spoke their Jewish language among themselves and another language to their non-Jewish neighbors. Rather, the Jews were internally bilingual. In most places they communicated in two different "Jewish" languages. One of these languages, Hebrew, was the language of prayer, holy texts, and scholarship; the other was the Jewish vernacular used in daily life. Using the categorization of the first chapter, Hebrew represents the great tradition and the vernacular the little tradi-



Map 3.1 Similarity and dissimilarity of Jewish and non-Jewish languages

tion. Hebrew was what Jews in most, but not all, cultures had in common, while the vernaculars differed from country to country and were not mutually intelligible.

What made a Jewish vernacular Jewish? In most cases, the vernacular languages of traditional Jewish communities had several characteristics in common. First, they were languages that Jews had learned by contact with non-Jewish neighbors at some point in their migrations. They were thus not of Jewish origin, although they often had Jewish characteristics (like the Hebrew alphabet) and performed Jewish functions (such as describing details of Jewish ritual). Second, they were generally learned not in formal schooling but by listening to native speakers. Since the languages were learned orally and based on colloquial usage, Jews generally wrote them down in their own Hebrew alphabet. The main exception to this is ancient Greek, which Jews did write in the Greek alphabet. Third, Jewish languages generally had a larger or smaller admixture of words of Hebrew origin (more precisely, of Hebrew and Aramaic origin). Fourth, Jewish

languages often had elements of languages spoken at an earlier stage in Jewish migrations. Finally, Jewish languages were often different in nuance, pronunciation, intonation, and grammar from the speech of the non-Jewish population among whom Jews lived.

Usually the Jewish languages began by resembling those of the Jews' neighbors. Sometimes, however, as the result of migrations, Jews and non-Jews spoke totally different languages, and the speech of the Jews resembled that of non-Jews in another part of the world (Map 3.1).

Variations in Hebrew



Though I began by referring to Hebrew as a unifying factor among the Jews of the world, this statement requires a number of qualifications. First, as noted in Chapter 2, certain Jewish groups, like the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, did not use Hebrew at all. But even among the majority of Jews who did use Hebrew, the unifying nature of the common language was limited. Except for rabbis and scholars (and even sometimes among these groups), most Jews could barely write, much less speak, Hebrew as an independent language. They could recite their prayers in Hebrew, read it by rote, and perhaps translate some passages from the Bible or Talmud into the vernacular. Hebrew functioned as a holy language, not as a living, spoken one. The unifying force of Hebrew was restricted to its written aspect. What Jews around the world shared were Hebrew or Aramaic *texts*, including the Bible, prayer book, Talmud, and Passover Hagada. But because they shared only the written form of these texts, they were unable to hear how the Hebrew of their fellow Jews *sounded*. As a result, the same words could be read by Jews in different lands, but they would be read according to different reading traditions.

Without getting too technical, it will be helpful to look at some examples of the differences in reading tradition. Among rabbinic Jews, as mentioned in Chapter 2, there were three main reading traditions—Ashkenazic, Sephardic-Oriental,

and Yemenite. Nonrabbinic groups such as the Samaritans had a very different reading tradition. Consider the well-known Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (Sabbath). You can notice that this word has two different vowel marks under the letters even if you cannot read Hebrew. Hebrew is read from right to left. The first vowel (below the letter on the right) is called *patach* and the second is called *kamatz*. You will also notice that the final letter ת (*tav*) has no dot (*dagesh*) inside it. In the Ashkenazic tradition the word is pronounced *sha'bos*, differentiating the two vowels and placing the accent on the first syllable. The last letter is pronounced *s* since the final *tav* does not have a dot. If it had a dot, it would be pronounced *t*. In the Sephardic-Oriental tradition, which is the basis of modern Israeli Hebrew, the word is pronounced *shaba't*, with the accent on the second syllable and no distinction between the first and second vowel or between *tav* with or without a dot (both are pronounced *t*). Thus Ashkenazic Hebrew preserves several distinctions not found in Sephardic-Oriental Hebrew. Yemenite Hebrew differs from both systems. It pronounces the word *shabo'th*. Like Ashkenazic Hebrew it distinguishes between the two vowels and between *tav* with or without a dot, but unlike Ashkenazic Hebrew, it pronounces the final letter *th* (as in "teeth") and puts the accent on the final syllable. Italian Jewry, which was transitional between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions, had an intermediary pronunciation. In Italy the word is pronounced *shaba'd*, with the Sephardic-Oriental accentuation and loss of vowel distinctions but with the Ashkenazic distinction between *tav* with or without a *dagesh* (though pronounced *d* rather than *s*).

Which tradition is the original one? Probably none of them. We can assume that the three reading traditions diverged from a common ancestor, but we cannot know how that common ancestor sounded. We know that the divergences were caused mainly by communications barriers created by distance. People only heard the Hebrew pronounced in their area; they never heard the alternate types. Presumably each tradition preserves some element from the common ancestor missing in the other traditions. Samaritan Hebrew, which diverged from the other traditions at a very early date, is much poorer in distinctions than any rabbinic Hebrew reading tradition. Perhaps it derived from a totally different source than the three rabbinic traditions (Table 3.1).

Distinction between letters with or without dot (dagesh): + = distinct - = both same		Samaritans	Yemenite	Other Judeo-Arabic	Judeo-Persian	Sephardi	Italian	Georgian	Ashkenazi
ב beth	b/v	-	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
ג gimel	g/gh(r)	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	-
ד daleth	d/dh	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
כ kaf	k/kh	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
פ pe	p/f	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+
ת tav	t/th, t/d or t/s	-	+	(+ in Iraq)	-	-	+	-	+
pronunciation of ayin		-	+	+	-	-	ng	q	-
+ = guttural									
- = silent									
ng = as in sing									
q = guttural k									

There are many other systematic divergences between the three main traditions, and there are also divergences within each tradition. Without going into too much detail, I will outline some of them. Going back to the *dagesh*, Hebrew distinguishes up to six letters with or without a dot: *beth*, *gimel*, *dalet*, *kaf*, *pe* and *tav*. Samaritan Hebrew has none of the distinctions and pronounces these letters, respectively as *b*, *g*, *d*, *k*, *p*, and *t* in all cases. Yemenite Hebrew and some Oriental traditions (for example, that of Iraq) distinguish all six. Yemenite Hebrew, for example, pronounces *beth* as *b* and *v*, *gimel* as *j* (as in "jam") and *r* (in the back of the throat), *dalet* as *d* and *dh*, *kaf* as *k* and *kh* (like *ch* in German *ach*), *pe* as *p* and *f*, and *tav* as *t* and *th* depending on whether or not they have a *dagesh*. Ashkenazic and Italian Jews distinguish between letters with and without a dot in only four cases. Most other Sephardic-Oriental traditions distinguish three, though some have two, four, or five distinctions (Table 3.1). Ashkenazic Jews pronounce *alef* and *ayin* as silent letters, while most Jews in

the Arab world pronounce them as two separate guttural consonants. (You have to hear them to understand the difference; English has no equivalents.) They also distinguish between *khaf* and *het* and often between *kaf* and *quf*. All these are distinctions completely lost to Ashkenazic Jews and to many Sephardic-Oriental Jews outside the Arab countries.

Modern Israeli Hebrew is said to follow the Sephardic tradition. This is true only in part. Israeli Hebrew was created by secularized Ashkenazic Jews who wished to break with their *galut* "Diaspora" past. They rejected their native tradition and copied the pronunciation of the Sephardim. But they did so with an "Ashkenazic ear." They were unable to pick up the guttural ayin, the rough-breathing het, or the back-of-the-throat quf. So modern Hebrew is generally pronounced the way Ashkenazic Jews thought Sephardic Hebrew sounded. Since Ashkenazic Jews generally make up the bulk of the wealthier and most prestigious population in Israel, many Jews from the Arab countries have become ashamed of their native pronunciation and have dropped their Middle Eastern gutturals. So modern Hebrew is a homogenized version of the former multiplicity of reading traditions and the result of the different traditions coming together in one country.

Jewish Vernaculars



Great as the differences in Hebrew reading traditions were, they were relatively minor compared to the differences in vernaculars. If a traditional Jew from one country entered the synagogue of a different tradition where modern Israeli Hebrew was not used, he would probably recognize that the language of prayer was Hebrew but would have difficulty following the prayer. But with regard to the vernaculars, the various Jewish traditions did not even share texts they could all read. Even the Hebrew elements, which all the languages had in greater or lesser number, were often quite divergent. Ashkenazic Jews would wish *mazel tov* (congratulations, literally, "a good constellation"), while Oriental Jews would say *besi-*

man tov (literally, "with a good sign"). Ashkenazic Jews in Eastern Europe would pray from a daily or weekly *sidur*, while Ashkenazic Jews in Germany and many Sephardic Jews used the word *tfila* (literally, "prayer") for prayer book. Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews prayed from a *machzor* on the holidays, while Yemenite Jews used a *tiklal*. These examples can be multiplied by the hundreds.

But most of the words in the Jewish vernaculars were not of Hebrew origin at all. Sometimes this applied even to words referring to religious matters like "to pray," "to read the Torah," "warm Sabbath food," "skullcap," or "synagogue." Were we to map these expressions, we would find that the boundaries fall in different places for different words. For instance, the Jewish vernacular word for synagogue in many Christian countries originally meant "school" (*shul* among Ashkenazic Jews, *scola* among Italian Jews, *ecole* among Jews in medieval France). One explanation of this term is that government restrictions were placed on building new synagogues, and so, in order to evade the official Christian rules, the Jews said they were building schools rather than synagogues. In other countries Jews used versions of the Greek *synagogos* (literally, "place of assembly"). Among Spanish-language Sephardim a synagogue was called *esnoga*, pronounced by Jews in parts of the Arab speaking world *snugha* (with *gh* pronounced like a throaty *r*). Jews in other Arabic countries used the Arabic word *sla* (literally, "prayer"), while in Iran and among Karaites in the Crimea the word *kenisa* was used.

The best way to try to understand the nature of Jewish vernaculars is to look at the examples of a few specific Jewish languages, to see how they developed and how they differed from each other. To begin with, we will look at the language best known in the West and the one that had the largest number of speakers—Yiddish.

Though the basic structure of Yiddish is Germanic, the language (as spoken in Eastern Europe) had at least three other major linguistic elements: Hebrew-Aramaic, Romance, and Slavic. This is a reflection of the migration history of the Ashkenazic Jews. The Romance element, which today consists only of a small number of words but was once larger, tells us much about the origin of the Ashkenazic Jews. It supports the idea, based on historical documents and Jewish names, that the first Jews in Germany came mainly from France and Italy. Many

words relating to religious life came from this Romance element. The word for “to bless,” *benshn*, is one such word, coming from the Latin root *benedicere*, probably via Italian. One theory is that Jews coming into medieval Germany avoided the German word for to “bless,” *segnen*, because it originally meant “to make the sign of the cross.” Another religiously bound word is the word for “to read,” especially “to read the Torah.” The Ashkenazic word for this, *leyen*, comes from the Old French *leier*. It is a good example of a word that came from an earlier “stop” in Jewish migrations. This point is further illustrated by a curious peculiarity. If Ashkenazic Jews used the Romance word *leier*, one would expect Jews speaking vernaculars based on Romance languages also to use that word. But they don’t. Instead they use a word from an even earlier stage of their migration: the Greek *meletare*. So, in Djudezmo the word is *meldar*, in Judeo-Italian *meletare*, and in now extinct Judeo-French *miauder*. German Jews preserved some Romance words lost by their fellow Ashkenazim who migrated to Eastern Europe. Among these are *oren*, meaning “to pray” (from Latin *orare*), *prayen* for “to ask, invite” (from Old French *preier*), and *piltsl* for “maid” (from Old French *pulcelle*).

One very interesting example of the Romance element in Yiddish is the word referring to the Sabbath dish cooked overnight and kept warm until the next day, which enabled Jews to enjoy a warm meal without violating the prohibition on cooking on the Sabbath. Such foods are found in all rabbinic Jewish communities, though the recipes differ widely, as will be seen in Chapter 6. The Talmud refers to such foods as *hamin* (literally, “warmed”). Ashkenazic Jews used the Old French word for “warming up,” *chalent* (the same root as the English word “nonchalant,” literally “not all heated up”). This is the origin of the Yiddish *cholent* (in Germany called *shalet*).

Other Romance elements are found in Ashkenazic Jewish personal names. Generally the “funny-sounding” names are the ones with Romance origins, for instance *Vitl* (from Latin *vita*, “life”), *Shprintza* (from Italian *speranza*, “hope”), *Bunem* (from Old French *bon homme*, “good man” or *bon nom* “good name”), *Feitel* (from Italian *vitale*, “alive”), or *Feivush* (from Old French *vives* or Latin *vivus*, “living”). My favorite is *Yente*, which began as a woman’s name, derived from Old French or Italian *Gentil* or *Gentile*, “the gentle one.” Now it is generally applied to

a gossip or someone who talks too much. It’s a long way from “the gentle one” to a yente.

When speakers of Judeo-French and Judeo-Italian arrived in the Rhineland some 1000 years ago, they came into contact with various dialects of spoken German. Modern Yiddish contains elements of several German dialects, especially those of southern and central Germany. The dialects of northern Germany, which are closer to English than to modern German, have had almost no influence on Yiddish. (In northern Germany, local dialects said *up*, *planten*, *wat*, *dat*, and *tid*, whereas southern German dialects had *auf*, *pflanzen*, *was*, *das*, and *zeit*. Modern standard Yiddish has *af*, *flantsn*, *vos*, *dos*, and *tsayt*.) Despite the fact that the first Ashkenazic Jews came into contact with western German dialects, modern Eastern European Yiddish is based mainly on the Bavarian and Saxon dialects, which belong to the eastern group of dialects. Although Jews began speaking Germanic dialects at least 1000 years ago, their speech separated into a distinctive Yiddish only slowly. Yiddish shared most of the changes of medieval German until about 1500 or so, and diverged greatly only after that time, when the bulk of Ashkenazic Jews migrated to Poland. The Yiddish dialects among Jews who remained behind in Germany were closer to the speech of their neighbors than to the Yiddish of Eastern Europe, but they were still noticeably different. In a manner analogous to Black English dialects in the United States, which whites could generally understand but considered improper English, German Gentiles could understand most of what their Jewish neighbors said but thought they spoke corrupt German. When the bulk of Ashkenazic Jews migrated to Eastern Europe, they lost contact with German speakers and therefore their language diverged more and more from modern German. Still, even today, modern Yiddish is closer to German than are such other Germanic languages as Dutch, English, and Danish.

The Hebrew element in Yiddish was important from the start and still plays an important part in modern Yiddish, even though words of Hebrew origin are greatly outnumbered by words of German origin. Hebrew words are incorporated into Yiddish in a number of ways. First, there are individual words incorporated into Yiddish sentences. Generally these are pronounced more like Yiddish than they are when read in the prayer book. So the word read *sha’bos* in Ashke-

nazic Hebrew is pronounced *sha'bes* in the vernacular. *Ba'al habayis* (householder) becomes *balebo's* and *yoym toyv* (holiday) becomes *yo'ntef*. Hebrew words in Yiddish are conjugated and declined like Germanic words. Hebrew-origin nouns are also combined with German articles, as in *der shabes*, *di mikve*, and *dos sefer*, and non-Hebrew words sometimes acquire Hebrew plural endings, as in *doktoyrim*. Sometimes one word is made up of elements from several different language families: *Rebetsin* (rabbi's wife) includes a Hebrew origin root *rabi* and Romance and Germanic feminine endings (respectively, *-etse-* and *-in*).

Finally, there is the Slavic element in Yiddish, which comes from many different Slavic languages. The oldest are Czech-origin words like *nebekh* ("poor thing") or *pareve* ("neither meat nor milk"). Most common are words of Polish origin. These are often pronounced as they were in older stages of Polish. In addition, Yiddish, unlike Polish, reduces unaccented syllables to *e* (*shwa*) and lacks the Slavic noun case endings. It sometimes simplifies the complicated Polish consonant groups. (So the Polish town of Mszczonow [pronounced like *mshtsho'noov* in modern Polish] was pronounced A'mshenev by the Jews.) Sometimes words mean something different in Yiddish than in Polish. The most extreme example is Polish *modny* (in style), which becomes Yiddish *mo'dne* (strange). There are variations in accent that differ from modern Polish (for instance, *po'dlege* [floor] in Polish Yiddish as against *podlo'ga* in Polish. Curiously, outside Polish-speaking areas, the Yiddish word is pronounced *podlo'ge*, much as in modern Polish). Polish-origin words are found even in areas where Polish was not spoken, like the Ukraine or Lithuania, while some Ukrainian words have penetrated the Yiddish of Polish-speaking areas.

These various elements in Yiddish have fused together in such a way that words of different origin are generally treated the same way grammatically. This is similar to the way words of Anglo-Saxon, French, and Latin origins have merged together in modern English to form a single language.

In Eastern Europe, Yiddish played a very different role than it did in Germany. Whatever their neighbors thought of the Jews and their language, they couldn't consider it merely a corrupted form of the local language. They had to think of it as a separate "language of the Jews." This is reflected in the name Yid-

dish itself, which literally means "Jewish." Its status was perhaps more closely comparable to the status of Spanish in the United States, perhaps resented but still recognized as a language in its own right, unlike the status of Yiddish in Germany as improper Jewish German.

The vernacular of the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain has many parallels to Yiddish, but also considerable differences. It contains fewer words of Hebrew origin than Yiddish and adopted fewer new elements in Greece and Turkey than Yiddish did in Poland. Still, it had the same status as an imported and foreign language not understood by the non-Jewish population. Having been cut off from contact with living Spanish since the end of the fifteenth century, the language of the Sephardic Jews developed in a somewhat different direction. The language had two separate styles. The style used for translations of the Bible and other Hebrew works, called Ladino, followed Hebrew word order and style. The more folksy vernacular style used in ordinary speech was called Djudezmo, which like Yiddish is literally translated as "Jewish."

A few examples will show the special nature of Djudezmo. Its vocabulary avoids certain words that have a strongly Christian connotation. While "Sunday" in Spanish is *Domingo* (literally, "the Lord's day"), Djudezmo used the more neutral Arabic *alhad* (literally, "the first day"). Saturday was not Sabado but *shaba't*, and Friday night was *noche de shaba't*. Similarly, Spanish *Dios* ("God") sounded like a plural to the Jews, who instead spoke of *el Dio* (literally, "the God").

Everyone knows that in modern Spanish *j* is pronounced like an *h*, as in José, which is pronounced *hosay*. But when the Jews left Spain, this *j* was still pronounced either like English *j* or like *z* in "azure." So in Djudezmo, one says *muzher'* for "woman," *i'zho* for "son," and *Djidio'* for "Jew." The distinction between *s* and *z*, which is lost in Latin American Spanish (in Spain the latter is pronounced like the English *th*), is still retained in Djudezmo. So Jews can distinguish between *caza* (house) and *cassa* (box). Modern Djudezmo incorporated some Turkish, Greek, and Slavic expressions, for instance *Ke habe'r* ("What's new?"), as well as Hebrew ones, such as *aboltar de cazal*, *aboltar de mazal* ("Change your house and change your luck") and *kheynozo* meaning "charming," with a Hebrew root and a Spanish ending.

Students of Spanish language and literature have shown great interest in the language of the Sephardim of the former Turkish Empire. Sephardic Jews have preserved much medieval Spanish epic and lyric poetry (*Romansas*) often lost in Spain. Unlike most modern Yiddish songs, these songs are rich in motifs both about chivalry and adventure and about love and desire. The language of the Sephardim also preserves grammatical, phonetic, and vocabulary forms no longer found in modern Spanish. Some scholars of Spanish enthusiastically (probably wrongly so) refer to the Jews as still speaking the classic language of Cervantes.

Judeo-Arabic has a longer history than either Yiddish or Djudezmo. Many of the greatest works of medieval Jewish philosophy were written in this language. Judeo-Arabic shares a number of the peculiarities of the Arabic language as a whole. The spoken language differs tremendously from the modern written language and from classical Arabic. Used over a large geographic area, the spoken Arabic of the various Arab countries differs so much that the various dialects are not mutually understandable. There are especially great differences between the Arabic of North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) and that of other countries.

In general, the Arabic speech of the Jews in a particular country was a variant of local Arabic. It was usually closer to (but not the same as) the speech of local Muslims than it was to Jewish speech in other parts of the Arabic world. Besides using some Hebrew words (sometimes in Arabic grammatical form), Jews often used different vocabulary and sometimes different pronunciation than their non-Jewish neighbors. In North Africa, Jews often pronounced their sibilants differently than everyone else. In some places they said "sh" where non-Jews said "s," and in other place it was the other way around, with Jews "hissing" instead of "hushing." In Baghdad, Jews and Christians spoke more like each other than either spoke like the Muslims, whose dialect was called *badawi* (Bedouin), implying that it was imported from the desert. In the Muslim East, the Muslims were often the newcomers and the Jews were the old native population—the opposite of the situation in Europe.

Jews wrote Arabic in the Hebrew alphabet, and there is much literature in this form, including religious works and even newspapers. The written form of



Map 3.2 Main regions of Italy

Judeo-Arabic, unlike Muslim Arabic, is less conservative and less influenced by the classical Arabic of the Koran.

Many people are unaware of the fact that a Judeo-Italian language ever existed. A much smaller number of Jews spoke Judeo-Italian than spoke Judeo-Arabic, though Judeo-Italian also has a long history. The earliest texts in Judeo-Italian date back to the Middle Ages. Like the other Jewish languages, Judeo-Italian was written in the Hebrew alphabet, contains quite a few Hebrew words, and reflects

the unique history of the Italian Jews. Like Arabic, Italian has regional dialects, which differ widely from each other. At one time, a large percentage of the Jews of Italy lived in the southern areas of Naples and Sicily. However, these areas of Italy came under the control of Spain, which expelled the Jews from the southern half of Italy between 1493 and 1510. As a result, Jews in Italy often spoke with the accents of areas farther south than those of the non-Jews. Roman Jews sounded more like Neapolitans and Florentine Jews sounded more like Romans. Only in the far northern area of Piedmont did the Jews speak dialects with few southern features (Map 3.2).

Internal Variation in Jewish Vernaculars

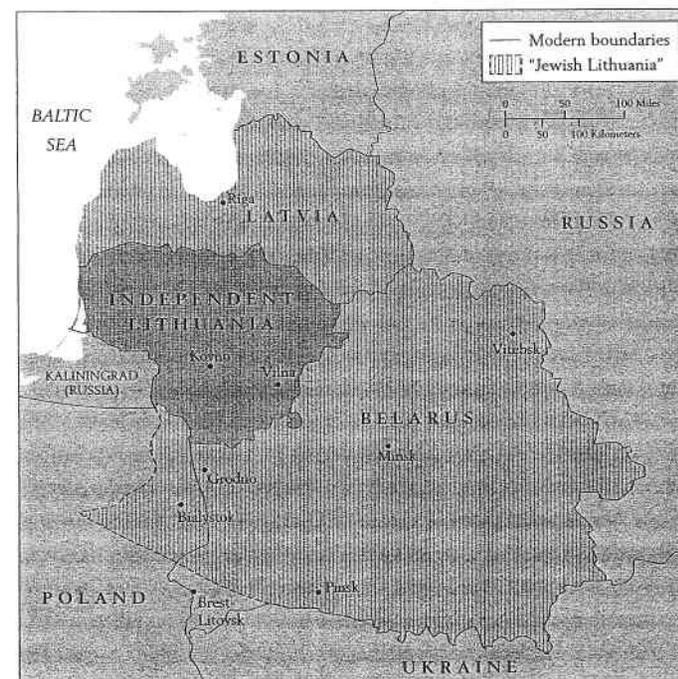


As we have already seen, Jewish languages varied internally from place to place. Sometimes this seems to reflect mainly the variation in speech of the non-Jewish population. In the case of Yiddish, however, the geographic patterns are quite independent of the non-Jewish languages. This raises some questions about the usual explanation that dialect boundaries are caused by communications barriers. If the boundaries for Jews run in a different direction from those for non-Jews, then maybe a mountain range or river or provincial boundary was not so much a physical boundary as a cultural one. For one group it might act as a barrier, while for the other, it might not impede communication at all. From this we can see that Jews not only had their own spoken languages but also their own geography.

One example of this difference in geographic concept is the diverging definition of Lithuania. Usually Lithuania in twentieth century Europe is associated with the speakers of the Lithuanian language and with the small Baltic republic that has recently regained its independence. This republic covers a fairly small area and has a relatively small population (about 3 million). Jewish Lithuania is much larger than the Lithuanian republic (Map 3.3). For Jews a "Litvak" (Lithuanian Jew) is someone who comes from anywhere in the eighteenth century Grand Duchy of Lithuania (see Chapter 2). This covers an area five or six times that of

modern Lithuania, with a population of some 15 million people. Litvaks can come not only from today's Lithuania but also from Belarus, Latvia, and the northeastern part of Poland (the area around Bialystok, for instance).

The Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish follows the boundaries of eighteenth century Lithuania and is quite distinctive from the other dialects. A Litvak would wear *a por heyzen* (a pair of pants), study the *Teyre* (Torah), and eat *kugl* (a Sabbath pudding) and *fleysh* (meat). He or she would not be able to pronounce the difference between a long or short vowel and in some cases would mix up "s" and "sh" (and say *gut sa'bes*). To the south and west, a Polish Jew would wear *a puur*



Map 3.3 Jewish Lithuania in comparison to modern independent Lithuania

hoyzen, study the *Toyre*, eat *kigl* and *flaysh*, and would distinguish the long *a* in *haant* (today) from the short *a* in *hant* (hand). In most of Eastern Europe outside Litvak territory, the Hasidic movement was dominant. In Jewish Lithuania the Hasidim were a minority, often a despised minority, especially in the western part of Lithuania (outside Belarus).

Before the eighteenth century, Yiddish was spoken not only in Eastern Europe but in Germany as well, where it was later replaced by High German. The former Yiddish dialects of Germany were even more different from what was spoken in Eastern Europe than Lithuanian Yiddish was from Polish Yiddish. Using our test words, a Jew in Frankfurt would wear *e paar hauzen*, study *Taure*, and eat *kugl* and *flaash*. He would also get his *ds* and *ts*, *bs* and *ps*, and *ks* and *gs* mixed up. So he would say *Daure* instead of *Taure*. He would also use a lot of vocabulary unknown to Jews in Eastern Europe. He would eat *datsher* or *berches* instead of *challe* (Sabbath bread) and go to the synagogue for *oren* instead of *davenen* (prayer). Despite these differences though, 18th century Jews in Frankfurt often read the same Yiddish books as Jews in Poland or Lithuania and were thought by their Christian neighbors to speak in a peculiar Jewish manner.

The Functions of Jewish Vernaculars



Jewish vernacular languages were not really purely vernacular. Most of them had a written form (in Hebrew script), and several of them developed complex and sophisticated literatures. This is especially true of Yiddish, Djudezmo (Judeo-Spanish), Judeo-Persian, and Judeo-Arabic. Judeo-Arabic was the chief vehicle for Jewish philosophical writing in the Middle Ages, and a number of epic poems on biblical themes were composed in Judeo-Persian.

Although Hebrew was the official language of the Jewish liturgy, folk tradition often introduced bits of the vernacular into the liturgy as well. This was probably least true among Ashkenazic Jews, among whom hardly a word of Yid-

dish was heard in the synagogue service. At most, we can cite the introduction to the grace after meals, "*Rabosai mir veln benshn*" ("Gentlemen, let us say grace") and the women's prayers at the beginning and end of the Sabbath—all of them more likely to be recited at home than in the synagogue. Among other Jewish groups, the use of the vernacular in prayer was slightly greater, but nowhere did it predominate. Sephardic Jews sang "*Bendicho su nombre de el senyor de el mundo*" ("Blessed be the name of the Lord of the universe") in Ladino when they took out the Torah, and alternated Hebrew and Ladino in singing *En Kelohenu* ("*Non como nuestro Dio*" ["There is none like our God"]). Their grace after meals ended with the Ladino words "*Siempre mezhor, nunca peor, nunca mos manke la meza del Criador*" ("Always may it be better and never worse; may we never be lacking the Creator's table"). Speakers of Judeo-Arabic also used the vernacular but less frequently. On the feast of Shavuot, North African Jews recited the Arabic commentary of Saadia Gaon on the Ten Commandments for hours during the service. Algerian Jews told me that Muslims would come to the synagogue on that day to listen to the classical Arabic of the prayer.

In most Jewish cultures the ceremony at which the vernacular was most used was the Passover Seder. This fit with the familial, folksy, and home-centered nature of the Passover ritual. Not only did the celebrants often translate the Hebrew Hagada into the spoken language, but they sometimes sang the various Seder songs in the vernacular as well. Alongside the almost universal Aramaic *Had Gadya*, one could hear the Judeo-Italian "*Un caporetto que ho compro mio Padre*" ("A Goat That My Father Bought"), the Ladino "*Un cavretico que lo merco' mi padre*," the Judeo-German "*Ein Zickelein, ein Zickelein*," and the Judeo-Arabic "*Wahad al dj'di*."

In recent times, the Jewish vernaculars have also acquired more modern and secular functions. Newspapers appeared in Judeo-Arabic, Djudezmo, and Yiddish. In the Soviet Union, periodicals were published in several other Jewish languages including Judeo-Tat and Judeo-Tadzhik. Some Yiddish periodicals in Poland had circulations of over 100,000. There were literary magazines, theaters, advertisements, and sometimes even official documents (for instance, birth and

marriage certificates) issued in the Jewish languages. Yiddish became the language of a whole network of modern schools in Eastern Europe, and textbooks for many subjects were published in the language in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Fading of the Jewish Vernaculars



With modernization, the Jewish languages encountered severe pressure. As Jews were granted political rights and required to acquire a secular education, the national languages of the majority began to supplant the Jewish vernaculars. Many countries began to refuse to accept documents or even signatures in the Hebrew alphabet. Educated Jews aspired to learn French and German rather than Yiddish or Djudezmo. Speaking in a Jewish dialect rather than in the "proper" language taught in school came to be seen as a sign of backwardness. The schools set up all over the Middle East by the Alliance Israelite Universelle (a French Jewish organization) used French as the language of instruction and tried to spread French culture among Jews in Persia, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire.

In Turkey in the 1920s, all languages had to be written in the Latin alphabet; thereafter, Djudezmo newspapers used Latin letters. Similar attempts were made in the Soviet Union, where writers of Judeo-Tat and Judeo-Tadzhik were forced to use first the Latin and then the Russian alphabet in place of Hebrew script. As traditional religious instruction and practices declined in many countries, fewer and fewer Jews could read the alphabet in which the Jewish vernaculars were written.

There was one other, totally unexpected, development, which probably sealed the fate of the declining Jewish spoken languages—the revival of Hebrew. Throughout much of the history of the Diaspora, Hebrew was the language of scholars, and the vernacular Yiddish, Djudezmo, or Judeo-Arabic was the daily language of the Jewish masses. With the return of more and more Jews to their ancient homeland in the early twentieth century, attempts were made to make Hebrew the everyday spoken language of the modern Jewish settlement. The

cause of Hebrew was fostered by the fact that it was the only language the Jews, coming from a host of different countries, had in common. The vernaculars served to divide the new settlers in Israel. Hebrew served to unite them.

Ironically, Hebrew has now become a living language spoken by virtually all Israeli Jews and taught as a living language in the Diaspora. Yiddish and the other Jewish vernaculars are spoken by fewer and fewer people outside extreme Orthodox circles. The vernaculars are now esoteric subjects, more likely to be studied by scholars than by the masses. Most Jews in the world today speak either the same language as their non-Jewish neighbors or Hebrew. The old pattern of Jewish speech in the Diaspora has almost completely disappeared.