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Asymmetric Fates: Secular Yiddish and Ladino Culture in Comparison

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CONTEMPORARY SPEAKERS AND SCHOLARS of Yiddish, on the one hand, and Ladino, on the other, face certain parallel pressures, most acute among them the evisceration of native speakers and centers of learning. Largely as a result, Yiddish and Ladino studies, perhaps more than ever, are conditioned today by nostalgia and mourning, sentiments both competing and complementary. If the fates of Yiddish and Ladino—and their speakers and scholars—have in certain respects converged, the paths that carried them to this point have been divergent indeed. What is more, a number of important differences, some of which are inherited from earlier periods, other of which are rather more contemporary in inspiration, delineate the current status and fate of these Jewish languages. This essay reflects on intersections and deviations in the story of Yiddish and Ladino, their speakers, and their scholars, rooting these meditations in a comparative history of Eastern and Southeastern European Jewries since the nineteenth century.¹

Within the context of a larger conversation on Jewish languages, paying heed to the theme of language use is, I submit, of keen importance. By studying Jewish languages in the context of social history, we may appreciate that they are passed on or abandoned, cultivated or eschewed, preserved or neglected, and, finally, shaped for reasons that are deeply

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1. This essay distills comparisons made in my book-length study of the parallel development of Yiddish and Ladino secular print culture in the Russian and Ottoman empires; in these pages, I carry these insights beyond the era of empire. Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington, Ind., 2004).

historical and, in a broad sense, political. In making this argument, this essay—like much of the recent scholarship on Yiddish and Ladino—aims to extract Jewish languages from the realm of the static or sentimental—hopefully without dismissing sentimentality as a profound catalyst to the study of history and language. Engaging in a comparative study of Yiddish and Ladino provides a particularly good vantage from which to desentimentalize Jewish languages, for the act of comparison removes Yiddish and Ladino from presumed and sometimes glorified isolation. In so doing, a comparative approach highlights what is unique about the histories of Yiddish and Ladino, and, at the same time, illuminates the threads that weave through their otherwise cacophonous worlds.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the vast majority of the world's speakers of Yiddish and Ladino lived, respectively, in Eastern and South-eastern Europe and, more specifically, in the Russian and Ottoman empires. Ninety-seven percent of the roughly five million Jewish subjects of the Russian Empire declared Yiddish their mother tongue at the fin de siècle, while as late as the Second World War, 85 percent of Turkish Jewry and the vast majority of the roughly 250,000 Jews who resided in the Ottoman Empire's other successor states (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Greece) identified Ladino as their native language. In both contexts, Jewish rates of literacy in these vernacular languages were extraordinarily high.²

The existence of vast numbers of geographically concentrated speakers of Yiddish and Ladino did not, in and of itself, lead to an explosion of

2. Discussion of Jews' rates of literacy in Yiddish and Ladino (in the imperial and postimperial contexts) may be found in a number of sources. On Sephardi rates of fluency and literacy in Ladino, see Kalev Astruc, "Data Concerning the Demographic Situation of the Bulgarian Jews, 1887–1949," *Annual* 16 (1981); Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia, 1979); Eyal Ginio, "'Learning the Beautiful Language of Homer': Judeo-Spanish Speaking Jews and the Greek Language and Culture between the Wars," *Jewish History* 16.3 (2002); Bracha Rivlin, ed., *Pinkas ha-kehillot—Greece* (Jerusalem, 1998); Walter F. Weiker, *Ottomans, Turks, and the Jewish Polity* (New York/London, 1992). The percentage of Russian Jews fluent in Yiddish is derived from the Russian census of 1897, an admittedly imperfect source. Results of the census may be found in: "Gramotnost' Evreev v Rossii," in *Evreiskaia Entsiklopediia*, ed. L. I. Katsnelson, et al. (St. Petersburg, 1908–13). This information is also summarized in English by I. M. Rubinow, *Economic Conditions of the Jews in Russia*, vol. 15 (New York: U.S. Bureau of Labor Bulletin, 1907 [repr. New York, 1976]). At roughly the same time as the Russian census was collected, the Jewish Colonization Association undertook its own study of Russian Jewry. These findings are reported in *Sbornik Materialov ob Ekonomicheskom Polozhenii Evreev v Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1904).

secular Yiddish or Ladino culture. These demographic realities were accompanied by a confluence of other factors, which, as a whole, formed something of an incubator for modern, secular, vernacular Jewish cultures. Among these factors was the loosening (in the Russian setting) and relaxed (in the Ottoman) nature of the imperial grip on cultural production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the contemporaneous and symbiotic development of print and popular culture in other minority languages, the political and literary ambitions of Sephardi and Ashkenazi intellectuals, the evolution of Jews' educational and class status, and technological innovations which allowed for the production and distribution of affordable reading matter. Together, these forces led to the production of manifold genres of Jewish culture in print: original works of poetry, drama, fiction, scholarly essays, dictionaries and encyclopedias, translations of world literature, and daily, weekly, and monthly periodicals. These genres, which proved wildly popular among readers of Yiddish and Ladino, were both products and catalysts of a dramatic wave of social, political, and cultural change that rocked Eastern and Southeastern European Jewries in the roughly four decades that bracketed the turn of the twentieth century. When viewed in tandem, certain idiosyncratic features of these shifting worlds are crystallized.

The proliferation of Yiddish and Ladino secular print cultural met with various restraints in the era of empire. In the Russian setting, imperial censorship provided a brake—at times more intense, at times less—on Yiddish cultural production. At the same time (and, no doubt, not coincidentally), lively intellectual debates produced fissures in the Yiddish-speaking world. These translated into a panoply of linguistic, political, and literary choices: among them the weighty question of which of a large number of languages one should speak, read, write in, or teach one's children. Those that allied with Yiddish (many of whom were also active defenders of bi- or multi-lingualism, and some of whom envisioned secular Yiddish culture as a vehicle of anti-imperial critique), helped shape a cultural revolution in active dialogue with the non-Jewish world and with émigré centers of Yiddish such as Tel Aviv, New York, Buenos Aires, and Cape Town.³

Sephardi intellectuals, too, differed over which of a wide variety of

3. My use of the term "cultural revolution" in this context is inspired by Benjamin Harshav's application of this term to the explosion of Yiddish and Hebrew cultural forms in Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley, Calif., 1990), Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993).

cultural and political solutions behooved the Jews of Southeastern Europe. And yet, though the turn-of-the-century Ladino cultural world was a lively firmament, Sephardi intellectuals were dissuaded from initiating a Ladino renaissance on a par with what certain Ashkenazi intellectuals were undertaking in Yiddish. One source of their hindrance was also their greatest benefactor: the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a philanthropic organization founded in Paris by the Franco-Jewish elite in 1860 that would come to command, with the sanction and encouragement of local leaders both secular and observant, enormous influence over Jews in the Levant. By opening schools and funding the creation of newspapers and other cultural institutions that would echo its agenda, the Alliance intended to reshape Levantine Jewry in its own image: acculturated and bourgeois, patriotic and anti-Zionist, well educated and possessed of vocational skill, conversant with Jewish history and secular in orientation. Partly as a result of the Alliance's ideological labors, and partly because the organization provided paths of social ascension that went hand in hand with an Ottoman economy in full mutation, the acquisition of French became a social ingredient of Jewish economic, cultural, and communal development otherwise not provided by Ladino (or, for that matter, Turkish).⁴

Thanks to the cultural and economic cachet of French and other European languages, and to the widespread distrust of Ladino by generations of AIU-educated Sephardim, cultural production in Ladino was less voluminous, diverse, and, arguably, original than that which could be found in the Yiddish-speaking world at the turn of the century. The restrained nature of the modern Ladino cultural movement—which, regardless of its qualitative features, was well received by speakers and readers of the language and, partly a result, as profound as was its counterpart to the east—significantly restricted the fate of secular Ladino culture well before the Holocaust decimated the majority of Ladino speakers.

By the mid-1920s, the empires that housed and, in various ways, fostered the Yiddish and Ladino cultural movements had fragmented into myriad nation-states and republics. At the outset of the interbellum period, the majority of Jews in Eastern and Southeastern Europe still pointed to Jewish vernacular languages as their mother tongues—despite

4. Esther Benbassa, *Une Diaspora Sépharade en Transition* (Paris, 1993); Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860–1925* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990); Aron Rodrigue, "The Ottoman Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of Ladino Literary Culture," *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. D. Biale (New York, 2002).

growing rates of fluency in the language of the state.⁵ A familiarity with Jewish languages did not, however, translate into symmetrical cultural developments. Yiddish and Ladino culture were both vibrant in the interwar period, but these languages were not destined for identical fates, at least in the short term; transformations in the political and cultural map of interwar Europe proved something of a boon for the Yiddish cultural world, but they had a sobering effect on the Ladino *Kulturbereich* of Southeastern Europe. There is evidence that in certain areas of interwar Eastern Europe, readers of Yiddish were growing younger, while in Southeastern Europe, readers of Ladino were growing older. Memoirs illustrated these dynamics and surveys confirmed them, but new forms of literature narrated them somewhat more graphically. In interwar Eastern Europe (as in North and South America), a rich genre of children's literature and school primers in Yiddish was being created for young readers: in the Ladino speaking world, a paucity of comparable sources existed. Similarly, the penning of Yiddish autobiographies was increasingly captivating the interest of young adult writers in Poland and beyond, while the Sephardi diaspora witnessed no such trend in Ladino.⁶

5. In the Soviet setting, Yiddish had an unnatural impetus to survive. As a result of the state's determination that there be a national Jewish language, 72 percent of Jews in the Soviet Union would claim Yiddish as their mother tongue by the early 1920s. In the same decade, nearly 80 percent of Polish Jewry declared Yiddish their mother tongue. Meanwhile, for the vast majority of Turkish and Bulgarian Jews, as for other Jews in the Balkans, Ladino remained a mother tongue well into the 1920s. Among the many sources that discuss Jewish rates of fluency and literacy in Yiddish and Ladino in the interwar period are the sources cited in footnote 1, and also see Joshua Fishman, *Yiddish: Turning to Life* (New York, 1991); Jacob Lestchinsky, "Di Shprakhn Bay Yidn in Umophengikn Poyln," *YIVO bleter* 22 (1943); Saul Mézan, *Les Juifs Espagnols en Bulgarie* (Sofia, 1925); Chone Shmeruk, "Hebrew-Yiddish-Polish: A Trilingual Jewish Culture," *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, ed. Y. Gutman, et al. (Hanover, N.H., 1989); Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* (Princeton, N.J., 1972); Rakhmiel Peltz and Mark Kiel, "Di Yiddish-Imperye: The Dashed Hopes for a Yiddish Cultural Empire in the Soviet Union," *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages: Their Past, Present, and Future*, ed. I. T. Kreindler (Berlin/New York, 1985).

6. On Yiddish-language children's literature, see Dina Abramowicz, "On the Beginnings of Yiddish Children's Literature," *Judaica-Librarianship* 3.1–2 (1986); Chone Shmeruk, "Yiddish Adaptations of Children's Stories from World Literature," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry, an Annual*, ed. E. Mendelsohn and R. I. Cohen (Oxford, 1990). On Yiddish-language autobiography, see Marcus Moseley, "Life, Literature: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Interwar Poland," *Jewish Social Studies* 7.3 (2001); Hirszt Abramowicz, et al., *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II* (Detroit, 1999); Jeffrey

The emergence of new genres of Yiddish and Ladino secular print culture did not exist in political voids. For Yiddishist (Diaspora Nationalist) intellectuals in the newly created states of Eastern Europe after World War I, developing Yiddish culture in general and Yiddish youth culture, in particular, was viewed as a means of preserving—and possibly even expanding—political capital promised to the region's national minorities by the Treaty of Versailles. A comparable legal edifice in Southeastern Europe did not exist. What is more, in the virtual absence of a Sephardist (of Southeastern European Diaspora Nationalist) movement, Jewish intellectuals in the region did not widely envision the development of Ladino culture as an achievement towards which Sephardim in general, and Sephardi youth in particular, should strive. Perhaps this asymmetry also explains the different levels of energy that were directed at availing Yiddish and Ladino print culture to readers. In the Yiddish culture area of Eastern Europe, many Jewish communities maintained libraries and stocked them with Yiddish sources. One study conducted in interwar Poland documents that Yiddish books represented over 60 percent of the books in 138 libraries surveyed. Contemporary readers of Ladino in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, meanwhile, confronted a paucity of Jewish libraries. Those that existed tended to stock few sources in Ladino.⁷

Patterns of emigration contributed further to the relative youth of the Yiddish reading public and to the graying of readers of Ladino. To a certain extent, the Ashkenazi and Sephardi populations of Eastern and Southeastern Europe (respectively) followed similar migratory patterns. Both regions witnessed a great deal of migration—both intra- and extra-

Shandler, *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* (New Haven, Conn., 2002); Jan Schwarz, *Imagining Lives: Autobiographical Fiction of Yiddish Writers* (Madison, Wis., 2005). On the absence of memoiristic literature in the Ladino world, see Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *A Sephardi Life in Southeastern Europe: The Autobiography and Journal of Gabriel Arié, 1863–1939* (Seattle, 1998). On the more recent development of French- and English-language Sephardi autobiographies, see Sarah Abrevaya Stein, "Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries since 1492," *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. M. Goodman (Oxford, 2002).

7. Cited in Fishman, *Turning to Life*. On the role of libraries in Poland, see Ellen Kellman, "Dos Yidishe Bukh Alarmirt! Toward a History of Yiddish Reading in Inter-War Poland," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16 (2003). On the lack of libraries in the Sephardi world, see Robyn Lowenthal, "Elia Carmona's Autobiography: Judeo-Spanish Popular Press and Novel Publishing Milieu in Constantinople, Ottoman Empire, Circa 1860–1932" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1984).

regionally—in the forty or so years that bracketed the turn of the twentieth century. And in both contexts, it was young men and women who were most likely to emigrate abroad. But why Jews left their homes, and when they chose to do so, differed from context to context. The greatest wave of Eastern European Jewish emigration occurred in the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth. During these years, roughly two and a half million Jews left the region, most of them young adults in search of economic and social opportunities. By the interwar period, however, when Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe was slowing, Jewish emigration from Southeastern Europe was on the rise. Indeed, it was in the first decade of the twentieth century that this region saw the greatest upsurge of Jewish emigration. In other words, while Russian Jewry experienced a drain of its youthful population under the rule of empire, Southeastern Jewry experienced a drain of its youthful population in the empire's fading days. Thus at precisely the same moment that the Ladino cultural area of Southeastern Europe was graying, the Yiddish cultural area of Eastern Europe was retaining and replenishing its youth, even as it lost significant numbers to emigration. All this contributed to the asymmetrical production and legacy of Ladino and Yiddish secular culture in the interwar period.

These trends might not have had the particular effects upon the status of Yiddish and Ladino that they did were it not for the relative size of the Jewish populations of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. In the interwar period the number of Jews in the successor states of the Russian Empire exceeded six million, while in 1914 the number of Jews living within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire numbered around two hundred thousand. Arguably the larger Jewish population was more resilient in part because of its size. According to this theory, while large-scale emigration from the Russian Empire would inevitably have had an effect on Jewish culture in the region, large-scale emigration from the Ottoman Empire and its successor states would have been felt much more acutely. Similarly, though Jews in Eastern and Southeastern Europe both experienced declining rates of fertility in the interwar period, these shifts would have a more profound impact in the Southeast than in the East.⁸ Perhaps, all other things being equal—the relative strength of regional economies,

8. Lucjan Dobroszycki, "The Fertility of Modern Polish Jewry," *Modern Jewish Fertility*, ed. P. Ritterband (Leiden, 1981); Shaul Stampfer, "Marital Patterns in Interwar Poland," *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, ed. Y. Gutman, et al. (Hanover, N.H., 1989).

the pace of emigration, the appeal of non-Jewish languages—the Sephardim of the (former) Ottoman Empire, because they were fewer in number, were simply more vulnerable to a reversal of the good fortune they experienced under empire.

Educational patterns and intellectual trends highlight other asymmetries in the vibrancy of Yiddish and Ladino culture in the interwar period. In Poland and in the Soviet Socialist Republics of Ukraine and Belorussia, the number of primary schools in which Yiddish was the main language of instruction (or in which literacy in Yiddish was taught) rose dramatically in the 1920s. (In the Soviet setting, Yiddish schools were erected as Sovietizing instruments and in some regions their attendance depended upon coercion. By 1930, they were essentially Jewish in language alone).⁹ If in the Soviet Union the production of Yiddish culture could rest on draconian motives, in Poland and Lithuania, the Yiddish school movement was supported by—and in turn fueled by—a secular Yiddishist movement. Perhaps the greatest achievement of this circle was the creation of the Yiddish Scientific Institute in Vilna in 1925. The YIVO Institute maintained an ambitious scholarly agenda, of which the study and preservation of Yiddish was one dimension. The YIVO Institute also contributed to the standardization of Yiddish that—in contradistinction to Soviet Yiddish, which was required by all Soviet publications—continues to be recognized as authoritative by most scholars.¹⁰ Finally, the development of a prolific Yiddish cultural milieu in North and South America in the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth—a Yiddish-speaking diaspora, if you will—heightened the allure and sustainability of Yiddish culture still further. Some Jewish writers and activists from Eastern Europe adopted Yiddish only after encountering Yiddishist culture in the United States, and Yiddish culture in this context helped further transform the Yiddish-

9. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*; Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917*, 2 vols. (New York, 1987); Nathan Eck, "The Educational Institutions of Polish Jewry (1921–1939)," *Jewish Social Studies* 9.1 (1947); Miriam Eisenstein, *Jewish Schools in Poland 1919–1939* (New York, 1950); Shimon Frost, *Schooling as a Socio-Political Expression: Jewish Education in Interwar Poland* (Jerusalem, 1998); Kh. Sh. Kazdan, *Di Geschikhte fun Yidishn Shulvezn in Umophengikn Poyln* (Mexico City, 1947); David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918–1950* (Cambridge, 2004).

10. Cecile Kuznitz, "The Origins of Yiddish Scholarship and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2000); Lucjan Dobroszycki, "YIVO in Interwar Poland: Work in the Historical Sciences," *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*.

speaking “homeland” of Eastern Europe, in part by offering new models of cultural and political activism.¹¹

No such pedagogical or scholarly activism emerged in the Ladino cultural world. By the interwar period, the number of Jewish children in the shrunken Ottoman Empire and its successor states who were educated in schools in which Ladino was likely to be taught was on the decline and, in any case, these schools were less and less likely to utilize Ladino as a primary language of instruction.¹² As mentioned earlier, the virtual lack of Sephardi Diaspora Nationalism or a large-scale Sephardi working-class movement, meanwhile, meant that no energy was put behind the attempt to promote Ladino among Sephardi youth. This was not only true of the former Ottoman lands. By the turn of the century a Levantine Jewish diaspora had emerged, and a lively Ladino culture had emerged in New York, as elsewhere in the Americas. But this émigré community was small enough, and, perhaps, the pressure to join the American (and the Ashkenazi Jewish) mainstream acute enough to render impossible the reversal of Ladino’s devolving status. Meanwhile, no language academy or central organization that would oversee the standardization or promotion of Ladino was ever created. Thus when Turkish was romanized in the 1920s, nearly all writers of Ladino followed suit, abandoning Rashi script in favor of the Roman alphabet. In the absence of a linguistic authority to oversee this process, speakers and writers of Ladino were now more than ever inclined towards linguistic borrowing.¹³

By some measures Ladino popular culture thrived in the interwar period. There were, for example, ever more Ladino periodicals published throughout Southeastern Europe and the Levant, and ever more readers

11. Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

12. Esther Benbassa, “L’éducation Feminine en Orient: L’école de Filles de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle à Galata, Istanbul (1879–1912),” *Histoire, Economie, et Société* 4 (1991); Ginio, “Language of Homer”; Mark Mazower, “Salonica between East and West, 1860–1912,” *Diálogos Hellenic Studies Review* 1 (1989).

13. Marc Angel, *La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1982); Aviva Ben-Ur, “Where Diasporas Met: Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews in the City of New York, a Study in Intra-Ethnic Relations, 1880–1950” (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1998); Aviva Ben-Ur, “The Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) Press in the United States, 1910–1948,” *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*, ed. W. Sollors (New York, 1998); Tracy K. Harris, *Death of a Language: The History of Judeo-Spanish* (Newark, N.J., 1994); G. L. Lewis, “Ataturk’s Language Reform as an Aspect of Modernization in the Republic of Turkey,” *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, ed. J. Landau (Boulder/Leiden, 1984).

read them.¹⁴ At the same time, the future of Ladino culture was by no means secure. Ladino continued to be valued as a cultural treasure by many Sephardim, but the economic, political, and pedagogical muscle required to preserve or indeed foster Ladino culture was not flexed, at least in any organized or sustained fashion. This communal apathy towards Ladino was born of perceived—and, to some extent, genuine—economic, political, and cultural challenges. One suspects that, given the constraints interwar Southeastern European Jewries faced (among them shrinking economic opportunities, the evisceration of traditional communities, the unviable future of a Sephardi Diaspora Nationalist movement, and a groundswell of regional nationalism and anti-Semitism), efforts to fuel a Ladino revolution may have appeared a frivolous, futile, or even dangerous exercise. Though these dynamics differed from those that eviscerated the Yiddish cultural milieu of North and South America (as elsewhere) a generation or two later, in some sense the dwindling Ladino renaissance of the Ottoman lands presaged that of the Yiddish in these and other contexts.

The genocide of European Jewry served as a perverse leveler of the internal and comparative diversity of European Yiddish and Ladino culture. In the course of the Second World War, the majority of Jews of Eastern and Southeastern Europe were extinguished, and with them were destroyed the cultural heartlands of Yiddish and Ladino. Those who managed to elude the death camps—among them the Jews of Turkey, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union—found their way of life profoundly and irrevocably transformed. European Jewish culture did not disappear in the wake of the Second World War, but those centers that had reigned in the nineteenth or early twentieth century—cities like Salonika, Vilna, and Warsaw—had effectively disappeared from the Jewish map.

If Yiddish and Ladino culture today are shadows of their pre-war incarnations, however, the reasons are manifold and cannot be attributed to the Holocaust alone. In the postwar American, Israeli, Soviet, and Turkish contexts, speakers and scholars of Yiddish and Ladino faced various disincentives to language development and maintenance: in each context, the decline of Jewish languages as vehicles of secular culture followed its own story line, but each, ultimately, moved in the same irreversible direction.

Certain divergences do, however, persist: some, indeed, have been sharpened in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the foundation of the state of Israel. Today a vibrant and growing Jewish community continues

14. Stein, *Making Jews Modern*.

to maintain an ideological commitment to the use of Yiddish. In the United States and Israel, Yiddish functions as the spoken native language of the Hasidim, who also rely on Yiddish as a principal language of instruction in *yeshivot*. What is more, Yiddish newspapers and publications designed for observant readers continue to be published in voluminous quantity. To some extent, this predilection for Yiddish carries on an old tradition of utilizing Jewish vernaculars as languages of religious expression: one thinks of the significance of the *Tæna u'rena* (Yiddish-language commentary and folklore whose use dates back to the seventeenth century and which targeted women readers, in particular) or of Ladino rabbinic literature of a slightly later era.¹⁵ The current reliance on Yiddish (as opposed to Hebrew) among the Hasidim perpetuates this tradition while serving as a bulwark of isolationism. At the same time, the Haredi reliance on Yiddish springs from instincts that are arguably more contemporary, among them an antistatist instinct (*vis-à-vis* Israel) that would be inconceivable in any other period. And even if one does situate this story in a broad historical landscape, asymmetries emerge. While Yiddish was wielded as a tool of leading antimodernists in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe (the Hatam Sofer among them), in the Ladino-speaking world religious leaders accepted and even encouraged the learning of foreign languages and never advocated the use of Ladino instead of Hebrew, as do contemporary Haredi rabbis. Similarly, while isolationist impulses inherited from the nineteenth century have shaped contemporary Haredi culture, Sephardi Orthodoxy has tended to be a more flexible and, perhaps, less fearful entity.¹⁶

It is easier to understand the devolution of Yiddish and Ladino secular culture as a post-Holocaust phenomenon, and certainly the Holocaust looms large in our story. But perhaps the most striking conclusion yielded by a comparison of the asymmetric Yiddish and Ladino cultural movements is this: the contemporary challenges that scholars and secular speakers of these languages face have long and winding roots, roots that extend back before the time of widespread geographical dispersal, before the time in which Jews were consistently pressured to join national and/or majority cultures, before the widespread embourgeoisement of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, before the establishment of a state of Israel, be-

15. Matthias B. Lehmann, *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (Bloomington, Ind., 2005); Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women* (Boston, Mass., 1998).

16. Jan Feldman, *Lubavitchers as Citizens: A Paradox of Liberal Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003); Norman A. Stillman, *Sephardi Religious Responses to Modernity* (London, 1996).

fore, even, the Holocaust. The convergence of the fate of these languages—that is, the fact that both, today, are endangered (in the case of Yiddish) if not nearly extinct (in the case of Ladino) as living tongues and vehicles of secular culture—is an anomaly of the modern period, and, thus, comprehensible only through a wide historical lens. Studying these languages alongside one another and as lived languages with indeterminate fates reiterates that languages are not only sensitive vehicles of expression but finely tuned barometers of possibility: cultural forms that were never static nor simply repositories of sentimentality but, on the contrary, were crystallized versions of the people, politics, and periods that shaped them.