Becoming Jewish Americans: Popular Culture and Protest in Yiddish New York

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Annabel Cohen is a third year PhD Student in Modern Jewish History at JTS and the curator of the exhibition “Living Yiddish in New York”, currently on display in the JTS Library. She has a Research Masters in History with distinction from University of London, for which she was also awarded Best Overall Performance at Masters level and Best Dissertation. In between her undergraduate and graduate studies, Annabel worked as a researcher at the Wiener Holocaust Library. Annabel teaches Yiddish for YIVO, the Workers’ Circle, and in September will be starting a new post teaching Yiddish language, history and culture at the Sorbonne University, Paris, where she is spending the year conducting research for her PhD. She also works as a translator of Yiddish and is one of this year’s Yiddish Book Center translation fellows, for which she is translating the memoirs of Jewish Communist Gina Medem. She publishes her translations relating to Ashkenazi Jewish Women’s religiosity on a blog www.pullingatthreads.com. She has also given classes on this subject at JTS, Yale, Wheaton College, City College New York, Yiddish New York and Yiddish Summer Weimar.
Leader of the Seder:
We are free citizens of our great America. We celebrate the festival of Passover, as our hearts desire. Do you know why? This is because the first generations of Americans, non-Jews and Jews, came here from countries where they were harassed and persecuted. Here, in America, they implanted freedom for everybody. Today we benefit from this freedom, and we continue the traditions of free America. Let’s hear some lines from the poem, which is engraved on the magnificent freedom statue:

Child A:
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

[In Yiddish – which stands open wide]
- Emma Lazarus
Postcard: In vilne iz er geven a rov, in nyu york iz er a pedler
(In Vilna he was a rabbi, in New York he’s a peddler).
New York: Druckerman, Canal Street, 1908.

Postcard: In der heym iz er geven a shuster, in nyu york paskent er shayles
(At home he was a cobbler, in New York
he’s an expert in Jewish law).
New York: Der groyser kundes
Postcard: In der heym iz er geven a bal-tfile, in amerike iz er an italyanisher tenor (At home he was a prayer leader, in America he’s an Italian tenor). New York: Der groyser kundes.

Postcard: J. Kerer, A gants yor iz er a bartender in a salon in coney island, un af rosh hashone un yom kiper vert er a khazn in a shul (All year he’s a bartender in a salon in Coney Island, and on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur he becomes a cantor in a synagogue).
Amerikte iz Eyn Goldn Land – unknown, JTS archives

The whole world is only full of swindle
Everybody strives towards one goal
Old and young
They look forward to robbing and making money
They don’t want to work
They work when nobody sees
One hears them say
They complain about America
But such a thing is unheard of
Because America is a golden country
You just have to be clever
You mustn’t shy away from any kind of disgrace
Then you’ll make enough money

Di Grine Kuzine – Yankl Brisker (Trans. Jacob Leiserowitz/Hyman Prizant)

My cousin from the old country came over.
She was beautiful as gold, the “greenhorn.”
Her cheeks were rosy like blood oranges;
Her feet were just begging to dance.

She skipped instead of walking;
She sang instead of speaking.
Happy and merry was her demeanor.
Such was my cousin.

I went to the lady next door,
Who has a little millinery store.
I got my greenhorn cousin a job there—
So long live the Golden Land!

Many years have since past.
My cousin has turned into a wreck.
She got her ‘paydays’ for many years
until nothing was left of her.

Under her blue, beautiful eyes
black bags have appeared.
The cheeks, those red oranges,
have aged and lost their greenhorn glow.

Nowadays, when I meet my cousin
and I ask her, “How are you, greenhorn?”
She answers me with a crooked expression:
“Columbus’s land can go to hell!”
| Don’t look for me where myrtles grow,  | nit zukh mikh, vu di mirtn grinen! |
| You will not find me there, my beloved. | gefinst mikh dortn nit, mayn shats; |
| Where lives wither at the machines,    | vu lebn velkn bay mashinen, |
| There is my resting place.             | dortn iz mayn rue-plats. |

| Don’t look for me where birds sing,    | nit zukh mikh, vu di feygl zingen! |
| You will not find me there, my beloved. | gefinst mikh dortn nit, mayn shats; |
| A slave am I, where chains clang.      | a shklaf bin ikh, vu keytn klingen, |
| There is my resting place.             | dortn iz mayn rue-plats. |

| Don’t look for me where fountains spray. | nit zukh mikh, vu fontanen shpritsn! |
| You will not find me there, my beloved. | gefinst mikh dortn nit, mayn shats; |
| Where tears flow and teeth gnash,      | vu trern rinen, tseyner kritsn, |
| There is my resting place.             | dortn iz mayn rue-plats. |

| And if you love me with true love,      | un libstu mir mit varer libe, |
| Then came to me, my good beloved,       | to kum tsu mir, mayn guter shats; |
| And light up my gloomy heart,           | un hayter af mayn harts dos tribe, |
| And make sweet my resting place.        | un makh mir zis mayn rue-plats. |