

On these pages you will find an outline of the course, with synopses of each chapter and the main points that are covered in the discussion questions for each session.

Yiddish Culture:

Between the Old World and the New

Curatorial and Research Services Provided by the Jewish Museum

This course explores the culture associated with the Yiddish language, a culture that developed over a thousand years in Europe and was brought to America with the great wave of immigration around the turn of the century. It presents feature films and documentaries, in both Yiddish and English, and background on the language and its place in Jewish life. The curriculum seeks to convey the richness of a culture that, despite losses through migration, assimilation, and the Holocaust, continues to speak to us today.

Overall issues addressed by the course include:

- Our connection to the idea and the heritage of Yiddish.
- The ways we may identify ourselves as Jews in terms of Yiddish culture.
- The aspects of Yiddish culture that we may seek to preserve.
- Continuity and transformation in culture over time and space.

THE INTRODUCTION traces the history of the Yiddish language from Jewish settlement in the Rhine Valley in the ninth century, through its flourishing in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, to its journey to America. It examines the nature of *Yiddishkeit* and its many different manifestations in religious, secular, and political society. It discusses the development of Yiddish literature and film, and considers the renewed interest in Yiddish culture today.

SESSION ONE

The Vital Culture of Polish Jewry: *Image Before My Eyes*

At the start of the twentieth century, Poland was home to three million Jews, the largest Yiddish-speaking community in the world. This documentary depicts the full spectrum of

Jewish life in Poland before World War II – from remote villages to small towns to major cities, from the traditionally pious to the ardently secular. It explores the great range of social and political movements such as Zionism, bundism, and anarchism, and the vital role of Yiddish in Jewish political, social, and cultural life.

Key issues addressed in the discussion questions include:

- The elements of culture that are passed on from generation to generation.
- The role of the Yiddish language in a sense of Jewishness.
- The factors that make for community, in Poland and in America.
- The means of blending the traditional and the modern, the religious and the secular.

SESSION TWO

A Satirical View: *East and West*

This silent film, made in Vienna in 1923, satirizes both the traditional religious world of the shtetl and the crass materialism of “alrightnik” immigrants to America. Starring a young and playful Molly Picon, the film shows Vienna as a golden mean, where it is possible to be cultured, Jewish, and Western at the same time.

Key issues addressed include:

- The portrayal of Polish Jewry in an unsentimental, even critical light.
- The view of American Jews as seen by Europeans.
- The continuity and loss of Jewish culture that may occur through migration and historical changes.
- The effect of clashes of culture on our notions of what is “appropriately” Jewish.
- The perspective given by the very different time period in which the film was made.

SESSION THREE

As Seen by Sholem Aleichem: *Tevye der Milkhiker*

The immensely popular Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem (the pen name of Shloime Rabinovitz, 1859-1916), created the character of Tevye the Dairyman in a series of stories written almost a century ago. This 1939 film, directed by and starring the great Yiddish actor Maurice Schwartz, focuses on the story of one of Tevye’s daughters, Chava, who falls in love with a Ukrainian peasant. This chapter examines the roots of Sholem Aleichem’s vision in the culture of Russian Jewry and the film interpretation made as Hitler’s armies began their advance.

Key issues addressed include:

- The connection between the character of Tevye and the Yiddish language.

- The importance of faith, and the choices it occasions.
- The role of parents in directing their children's lives.
- The aspects of Yiddish culture we wish to preserve.

SESSION FOUR

The Encounter with America: *Hester Street*

This 1974 film directed by Joan Micklin Silver was based on an 1896 story by Abraham Cahan, editor of the Yiddish-language *Jewish Daily Forward*. It presents the conflict between a young Jewish immigrant rapidly adopting American ways and his traditional wife, who arrives from Russia with their son to join him in New York. The chapter provides background on the experience of Jewish immigrants in turn-of-the-century New York, on Abraham Cahan, and on the transformation of this story from the book to the screen three-quarters of a century later.

Key issues addressed include:

- The role of Yiddish in the film.
- The conflict between Old World and New World values.
- The nature of community for Jews who lived on the Lower East Side.
- The challenges and conflicts involved in abandoning old ways and acculturating to new ones.

SESSION FIVE

A Life in Politics: *Free Voice of Labor*

Some immigrants brought a commitment to political activism with them from the Europe, while others were moved to political involvement by the harsh working conditions they found in America. Anarchism was one of the movements many immigrants joined, and for Jewish immigrants the anarchist movement was conducted largely in Yiddish. This documentary interviews men and women who recall the political fervor of their youth and examines the role of the Yiddish-language newspaper *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (Free Voice of Labor) in the movement and in the lives of its participants.

Key issues addressed include:

- The connections among language, politics, and social action in Yiddish immigrant culture.
- The anarchists' definition of their sense of Jewishness.
- The importance of ideals of social justice in Jewish tradition.
- The strengths and weaknesses of eyewitness testimony.

SESSION SIX**Master of Yiddish, “The wise and humble language of us all”:
*Isaac in America: A Journey with Isaac Bashevis Singer***

Isaac Bashevis Singer, who won the Nobel Prize in 1978, departed from the tradition of sentimental Yiddish writing in exploring such subjects as folklore, the supernatural, and lives of Holocaust survivors cast upon the shores of America. This documentary shows Singer at work, in his New York City neighborhood, and in public appearances where his impish personality and wry humor captivate audiences. This chapter examines his life and work, and his ideas about writing, being Jewish, and the place of Yiddish in the world (and, perhaps, the next).

Key issues addressed include:

- Singer’s relationship with his readers.
- The importance of the Yiddish language in his writing.
- His relationship to Judaism.
- The significance of place in his writing and in his life.

SESSION SEVEN**Wrap-Up**

This chapter presents ways to explore the heritage of Yiddish through family history and offers questions that relate to the films viewed and the course as a whole.

Key issues addressed include:

- The patterns of immigration and settlement in the families of course participants.
- The commonalities and differences among films in the course.
- The image of Yiddish culture in the various films.
- Our own definition of *Yiddishkeit*.
- The future of Yiddish culture in America.