Yiddish renaissance is tailored to the mainstream

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“Yiddish will continue to flourish under the Hasidim. Yiddish as a language of writers will not, because the Hasidim don’t read those works,” said Joseph Berger, author of The Pious Ones: The World of Hasidim and Their Battles with America, in an interview with The Atlantic.

“They use Yiddish as their lingua franca and to discuss the Torah. They don’t read secular works.”

Berger’s statement may be wrong, however, in its assumption that the future of Yiddish is contingent on the future of ultra-Orthodox Jews. In fact, this newfound Yiddish renaissance is often tailored to mainstream audiences and left-leaning artists who are currently carving out their own community.

“There’s a very keen sense that Yiddish is a friendly space for the arts,” says Miriam Udel, who teaches the language at Emory University and the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass. Her classroom at the Yiddish Book Center comprises artists, architects and playwrights who are drawn to the language’s progressive past and want to marry that with their own Jewish identities.

“Most of the voices that created what became canonical Yiddish culture had some kind of progressive political engagement,” she says.

Sandy Fox is continuing that tradition. She started studying Yiddish in 2013, around the same time she became interested in Middle Eastern politics and began questioning her Zionist upbringing.

“I realized the language would give me access to this whole world I felt was hidden from me,” she says.

By the time she had a better grasp of the language, in 2016, she was able to launch a Yiddish-language feminist podcast called Vaybertaytsh. “For the language to grow and live,” she says, “it needs to be used to talk about all sorts of things. It can’t always be self-referential.”

Many young, urban Jews are following a similar pattern. Rachel Epstein, the executive director of the Winchevsky Centre, a secular Jewish organization in Toronto with roots in the Yiddish labour movement of the early 20th century, recalls an intergenerational event that her group recently held, in which young Jewish activists sat down to chat with older ones, like platonic social justice speed dating.

“Many of those older people’s histories are rooted in Yiddishkeit,” Epstein says. “I think that was fascinating for young people – they want that history. There’s a lot of fear of its dying.” Members have since asked her to bring Yiddish courses back to the Winchevsky Centre, and she’s hoping that anyone interested in learning or contributing will get in touch with her.

Kathy Friedman sees that same cultural curiosity in even younger Jews. She’s the director of Jewish studies at Bialik Hebrew Day School in Toronto, which is one of the only Hebrew schools in North America to offer Yiddish classes. (It’s mandatory from grades 3 to 8.)

“We saw it as a source for creating both the memories and the narrative of who we are as a Jewish people,” Friedman says. “The children perceive and feel that Yiddish is something that’s a piece of them.”

This coming year, she’s spearheading a major overhaul of Bialik’s curriculum, particularly its Yiddish classes. “We’ve moved away from just conjugation,” Friedman explains. They are instead focusing on integrating the language more naturally into arts and culture, emphasizing modern Yiddish poetry, music and theatre.

“Education is taking a big shift,” she says. “We’re thinking differently, children are thinking differently.”

Part of that shift, she says, is driven by technology. Online Yiddish learning tools like YiddishPop, a branch of the BrainPop educational site, have made studying and absorbing the language far easier for children. Adult learners have unprecedented digital resources, too: the Yiddish Book Center offers more than 11,000 Yiddish titles and 100 audiobooks as part of its online library, which includes rare texts that have been scanned and uploaded for posterity. In a further nod to modern language learning, several staffers are currently creating a Yiddish course on Duolingo, the world’s most popular language-immersion app, which boasts 200-million users.

“The world of Yiddish is just like anything else: it’s adapted,” says Rokhl Kafrissen, a journalist and Yiddishist in New York. “Technology can make anything possible and easier, but humans still have to decide to invest their time and resources into actually doing these things.”

According to Kafrissen, the Yiddish scene in 2018 is “a different world” from when she first picked up her College Yiddish textbook at Brandeis University in 1994, thanks to Skype classes and social media. She points to In geveb, a sleek, online-only journal of Yiddish studies with editors and board members contributing from around the world, as an example of something that was “unimaginable” 20 years ago.

Because of all this reinvigoration, Kafrissen stands among those Yiddishists who roll their eyes at the ongoing talk of a “Yiddish revival.” For her, there’s so much Yiddish activity that we can’t reasonably call this a revival anymore — this is the adolescence of a new Yiddish culture.

“When does a revival become something else? After 25 years? 35?” Kafrissen wrote in Forward in 2010. “How many centres, institutes and festivals does it take to transform a revival into something permanent? When will we finally start using the word ‘continuity’ to describe the new decades-long ferment of Yiddish culture?”

Prof. Shniersons agrees. “Yiddish is turning away from a language of the past,” she says. The new Yiddish is contemporary and diverse, something she sees reflected in her classroom, when she looks out at her Asian, German and Irish students, like Tim Morris.

“It’s becoming this global demographic of learning Yiddish,” she says. “Yiddish has got this new blood in it.”