

But Does He Speak Yiddish?

I searched for my beloved; God helps those who help themselves. Late at night I trolled the Internet to find my *bashert*, my chosen one. He would *daven*, he would wrap *tfillin*, those fetching black boxes, around his arms and in the center of his forehead, but most importantly, he would speak a comely and succulent Yiddish.

There are Jewish Singles Chat rooms without number and I had tried almost all of them: Zionist Singles, Jewish Vegan Singles, Jewish Active Singles. There was not a Yiddish speaker to be found. After months of enduring chats about the evils of dairy products, the glories of Meir Kahane and boasts from triathlon champion Wonderjews, I joined “CYBERSHERT! FIND YOUR INTENDED ON THE INTERNET!” Encrypted in my profile was a list of my dreams and virtues, and a photo of myself taken on a brilliant August day by a former lover, whom I had had to dump on account of his linguistic limitations; he just never got it about the accusative and the dative. I entered the chat room and clicked on the User list. There were Davids, Aarons, Isaacs, even a Yirmiyahu, a Gershon and a Noach. Torah names filled the screen; the names of the Patriarchs, Prophets and Lost Tribes. I was in Paradise.

I waited demurely for a man to approach me with a Private Message. Meanwhile, I searched the screen for a trace of Yiddish. At last, a Private Message popped onto my screen; the red letters enlivening the dreary black of the general conversation. It was Joshua.

*-Hi, nice smile.*

*-Why, thank you.*

We exchanged demographics. And then, from him, the inevitable.

*-What are you wearing right now?*

I gave my unchanging response.

*-Do you speak Yiddish?*

*-Why?*

*-If you do, I will cyber with you. If not, I would have to be in love with you first....*

*-Are you kidding?*

*-Not at all. Goodbye.*

I put Joshua on “Ignore.”

Next, Adam, Steven Jonah. Monolingual, monolingual, monolingual. Ignore. Ignore. Ignore.

Then there was Martin, from London. Hmm, there’s nothing like Yiddish spoken with a British accent. Martin began predictably.

*-Nice pic.*

*-Why, thank you. Redstu Yiddish?*

*-Huh?*

*-Do you speak Yiddish? I guess you don’t. Take care, see ya.*

*-Wait, my grandmother does.*

*-Can you get her on line with me now?*

*-Why?*

*-So I can chat in Yiddish with her, of course.*

*-You’re joking.*

I put him on “Ignore” because he didn’t get it.

Next was Isaac. Isaac responded to my query by quoting *Khumash* to me in Hebrew. “*V’yidaber Hashem el Moshe laymor....*”

*-That is very beautiful, Isaac, but I asked you about Yiddish. And that Modern Hebrew pronunciation won’t get you anywhere either. How about a little Loshn Koydesh, at least.*

*-Oh come on. I speak fluent Hebrew. What’s with you? Hey, give me a chance. What are you wearing?*

*-Goodbye.*

The coy waiting was not yielding the desired result. I decided to be a modern woman and put myself forth, to assert my message to the world of Cyberjews. I typed in, for all The Room to see:

*-Ver vilt shmuesn mit mir?*

No one responded. I was crushed, bewildered. I sank into my chair for a few moments, then I rallied myself. After all, I am tough. I am strong. I am the daughter of a Survivor.

I tried again, this time casting out more daring words.

*-Ver vilt redn shmutz mit mir? Who wants to talk dirty with me?*

I sat. I breathed. I tried to detach from the outcome.

Gideon responded.

*-Hi, Margie. I wanna talk dirty with you.*

*-Oyf Yiddish?*

*-Sure, but I gotta tell you something....I have a...fetish.*

*-Vos iz dayn fetish?*

*-Tell me about your...feet.*

*-I would be happy to, but you see, I am so tired of English....*

*-Tell me about your feet and then we'll see about the Yiddish stuff....Do you polish your toenails?*

*-Why yes, I do. In fact, they look very nice right now, it being sandal season and all. I just had a pedicure this morning....*

*-What color are your nails?*

*-Guess?*

*-Well, my favorite is Seashell Pink Revlon....*

*-You now, it's amazing, Gideon, that's exactly the color polish I have on right now! I have ten exquisite toenails, each one gleaming seashell pink...and I just shaved my legs and....*

*-Uhhhh....don't stop, please....*

*-Well, I'd love to continue, but you see, I have a fetish too, Gideon....*

*-What is it?*

*-I think you can guess....*

*-What, tell me....*

*-Well, it's Yiddish. Syntax, grammar, vocabulary....*

*-Are you wearing high heels?*

*-Uh huh, really high, red leather, with open toes so that you can see my pink toenails and they have ankle straps....But Gideon....*

*-Yeah?*

I told him in Yiddish that suddenly, unexpectedly, I'd lost my command of the English language and could only continue in Yiddish. But not to worry; I could tell him everything he needed to hear in sweet *Mameloshn*.

*-Uh, the thing is, I don't really speak Yiddish that well, just a few words. Can't you keep talking to me in English?*

*-I'm so sorry, Gideon. You see, I have needs too.*

And so, I banished Gideon to the Land of Ignore. I was about to log off, sleepy and disheartened, when I saw the red flash of a Private Message. It was Reuben. Oh, that beautiful Yiddish that graced my screen, brimming with quotes from my favorite poets, Avrohom Reizen, Mani Leib, Itsik Manger, Peretz Markish, Moyshe Leib Halperin. His gift of text to me was idiom-rich, his sentences sound and graceful, and he went to Yeshiva, knew *Mishnah* and *Gemoyre*. I was beside myself. I asked him where he lived, hoping it was at least in North America.

He lived in Minneapolis! The Master of the Universe had answered my prayers. Wonders and miracles! Blessed are you, Lord our God, who has created me, sustained me and enabled me to reach this moment!

We chatted back and forth, literature, *Tanakh*, Yiddishist political intrigue. Oh, his fund of knowledge, and I could tell just by his transliteration that his accent was like that of a Polish Jew who never stepped foot out of the shtetl, just the way I like it.

*-Many men are brilliant, but thou excelleth them all.*

Then Reuben began querying me.

*-Can you cook? Are you skilled in the pastry arts?*

*-My soup will make you scream...golden chicken broth, with parsley...basil...fresh ground pepper....And I will bake you cakes, pies, tarts, bread and braided honey challah studded with raisins.*

*-Can you sew?*

*-I will sew you a tallis zekl, I will search the marketplaces of the world for the finest deep ruby velvet and I'll embroider your name on it...lovingly will I make the needle dance and gleam silver as I stitch a Star of David, two proud lions and the tablets of the Law....*

Soon it was past four in the morning. We'd been chatting all night, in a private room of our own creation, where our mother tongue enveloped us, no English intruded, where we courted and flirted and traded the proverbs of our ancestors in the language that holds fast to the very cells of our bodies. We bathed each other in Yiddish until we couldn't stay awake a moment longer. Wistfully, we agreed to part, but not for long. We promised to chat again the next day. I logged off and said a prayer of thanksgiving. I had found my *bashert*.

That night, I dreamed of a wedding canopy made of a *tallis* that could only be Reuben's, the four poles adorned with lush, fragrant roses and held up by Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Mendele Mordkhe-Sforim and Yehoyash. I awoke close to noon. As soon as the coffee was ready, I went to my computer and checked for an e-mail from Reuben. I had promised myself that I would not contact him until the agreed-upon time, having just read Mars and Venus Starting Over, but I could not refrain. I e-mailed him a poem.

The words of my beloved  
Behold, they come forth  
Leaping across circuits  
Bounding across the screen  
My beloved is as an Itsik Manger, a Mani Leib  
A Moyshe Halperin, a Peretz Markish  
As a King David, psalmist to God.

Your flawless grammar  
Your iron constructions  
Your graceful translations  
How comely your phrases  
How true your cadence  
My learned Yiddish scholar

Wrap your sentences around me  
Sustain me with your syntax  
For I am sick with love  
Your word-treasury, a king's storehouse.

Mid-afternoon, Reuben called me. His accent was as I dreamed it would be, that of a hearty, unapologetic Galitzianer. There was no wan "book-Yiddish" for him, no stuff Litvak pronunciations. His voice was deep and resonant, its rhythm like *gemoyre-nign*. He asked me if he could come over.

"Oh yes, and make haste, my beloved...."

I gave him my address, directions.

"Margie...."

"Yes...."

"What are you wearing?"

I described in loving detail to him what he told me that he wished I was wearing the night before, even though I owned no such garments.

"Really? Wow! Unbelievable!"

"Believe it!"

"I'll be right there!"

"Mmm, how 'bout in a couple of hours?"

"I can't wait that long. I'm burning for you."

"Of course you can. It will make it that much sweeter."

I dashed to my car and drove downtown to Fantasy World, popped a quarter in the meter and ran in. I rushed past the men perusing the videos and the couples examining the adult toys, up to the second floor. I got some cash from the ATM machine, selected and paid for the items that he was rhapsodizing about the night before. I stopped at Walgreen's on the way home to buy the Revlon Seashell Pink polish. Back home, I quickly showered, shaved my legs, moisturized, painted my toenails, and changed into an outfit I just bought. Then I put on his favorite CD, Blossom Dearie, such *mazl* that I happened to have it, dimmed the lights, cleared the dresser surface of the accumulated detritus, lit candles to perfume the air,

set out his favorite drink (bourbon) and a glass with ice and arranged a pack of his brand of cigarettes on my night-stand, pack open with one poking out at an angle to the ashtray.

The doorbell rang. He was pale, as befits a scholar, and under his eyes were shadows, undoubtedly from his late nights poring over the works of our Sages and writing scholarly articles for Mendele: Journal of Yiddish Literature and Language. We looked at each other, long and slow. He pulled me towards him and I inhaled his smell; a mingling of paper and leather, of ink, of books and of smoke that exuded from his pores and coursed through my veins. He kissed my mouth, my eyes, my neck. I pulled away from his embrace and took him by the hand.

I led him to my bedroom and got a cigarette for him, putting it in my mouth to light it, taking care to get some of my red lipstick on it. I knew he would like that.

“Sit down,” I said. “Have a drink. Let’s talk.”

“Talk? About what?”

I poured him a glass of bourbon, making sure that the ice cubes clinked invitingly.

“About directional prefixes versus verbs of motion.”

“Not now, later.”

“Not later, now.”

I had my way with him. We translated together, pairing those delectable directional prefixes with the auxiliary. It was good for him too; I could just tell.

*“Iz ariber, iz arayn, iz avek, iz arunter.”*

“Mmm, come here now,” he said, pulling me towards him by my shoulders.

Soon we were in a tangle, sweating on my bed.

“Mmm, that is so nice,” I said. “Don’t stop...and how ‘bout some...”

“Some what?”

“Reflexive verbs?”

“Now?”

“Yeah, you conjugate them better than anyone else, ever.”

“Later....”

“Please, it will be so special for me....”

“Uhh, ok, ok.”

As he conjugated for me, I engraved each word lovingly into the sulci of my brain.

*“Zikh freyen, zikh oyfkhapn, zikh krign, zikh ayln.”*

“OK, enough of that, now come here,” he said.

“Um, Reuben, will you play some...games with me?”

“Games? What kind of games? Sounds scary.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Well yes, but....”

“We can stop any time you say so.”

“What kind of games do you have in mind?”

“How ‘bout some...I feel a little weird saying this, but I really want to do it....”

“What?”

“Dialect role-play. I’ll use the Lithuanian accent and you use the Polish. Then we can even switch if you want.”

“This is too weird.”

“Please, Reuben, for me. We can play with sound values, vowels, diphthongs...please? And then I promise I’ll let you....”

“Really, will you put on the...”

“Mmmhmmm.”

He did, and I did, until we were exhausted. My pale scholar and I accompanied each other, each to our private Paradise. I watched his face as his eyelids got heavy, his breathing slow. He fell into sleep. I felt myself drifting too, as we lay in my bed, our bodies close but not touching.

