

Theodore Bikel's Address to the St. Louis Jewish Book Fair

October 2014

(Excerpt)

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My love of the Yiddish language came from my father who brought Yiddish to the table with love and care. His inspiration, in turn, came from Peretz, Mendele and mostly from Sholom Aleichem.

When I told my father, that last time I saw him on a sad summer day in 1979, that I and others would continue to read his beloved Yiddish books, it was not only the promise of a heartbroken son to his beloved Papa but I actually believed it. Now, an old man myself, I worry.

I do hope that we will continue to make it possible for Yiddish to exist and not to be relegated to be a museum piece. Along with six million of our people, a language was almost murdered. What threatens the language now is not the savage intent of Jew-haters but our own people's apathy and unwillingness to cultivate what is their own precious heirloom.

To them I say: LOZT NIT TSU AZ UNZER LOSHN ZOL FARSHVINDN UN UNTERGEYN KELOY HOYO. S'IZ AYERE YERUSHE. FARGEST ES NISHT!

For the Yiddish impaired among us, that means:

Do not permit our language to disappear and go under as though it had never existed. This is your heirloom. Never forget it!

Another reason for the neglect of Yiddish was the misguided notion by many that with the advent of Israel and the realization of the Zionist dream, Yiddish had to be supplanted by Hebrew, that it was either one or the other. As a lifelong Zionist, a lover of Hebrew, and as one who in his youth helped found a Hebrew theatre, I can tell you that I have always opposed the notion that Yiddish was an unworthy Diaspora tongue that deserved to be relegated to the dustbin. Ben Gurion's doing; he achieved much as founder of the State and Prime Minister. But I have never forgiven him for his treatment of the Yiddish language. He made his own mother tongue an exile in the land of the Jews.

Much less of an onus attached to people who hailed from Austria or Germany who continued to speak German in Israel for years, my mother among them. They were called '*yekkes*' a pejorative but a much milder one than what was used to describe Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe. '*vus-vusim*' they were called because they kept saying "*Vus? Vus?*" When they didn't understand what was being said. A *yekke* was on a somewhat higher rung of the ladder. They tell of a *yekke* who was walking along the shore near Nahariya when he saw a man battling the undertow and trying to reach the shore. Calling for help the swimmer cried '*Hatsilu! Hatsilu!*' and the *yekke* said "*Hebrew he learned. He should have learned how to swim!*"

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Not 25 years back, every Jewish symposium was about the dangers of our disappearing culture. The younger generation, the emissaries of the Jewish establishment warned, was intermarrying, assimilating, and soon, discounting the ultra-orthodox, no more than 732 people in this country would be calling themselves Jews. I am delighted to see that the opposite has come to pass. This younger generation delights me; they write TV series

about being Jewish, there is standup comedy, there are songs, prayers, rituals; they feel being Jewish is hip, and the book shelves are filled with books by Jews, about Judaism, poignant and funny, silly and profound.

At one time Jackie Mason came to my dressing room after a performance and said: "I saw your act. I was amazed, I was amazed that anybody should have the gall to stand up on the stage and be so Jewish as you!"

It got me thinking; I began to fear that I would be the last of the Mohicans. I am happy to report that I am not.