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THE QUEST FOR JEWISH ASSIMILATION EXPRESSED THROUGH *YIDDISHKEIT* IN AMERICA

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present the notion of Jewish assimilation reflected in the cultural phenomenon of *Yiddishkeit*. This can be easily mirrored in the notion of Jewish identity, tradition, Judaism and Jewish languages as part of *Yiddishkeit* in present-day America, which has made it possible for the Jewish diaspora to maintain its significant character in the multicultural United States.

Key words: Assimilation, America, Jewish diaspora, *Yiddishkeit*

Introduction

In the present paper the concept of assimilation of Jews in American society through the *Yiddishkeit* will be discussed. Although Jews had emigrated from various lands and nations, once they were in the United States, they tried to find their place in American society without having to sacrifice their Jewish identity, tradition, religion and culture. They could achieve this by sticking to the *Yiddishkeit*, their Jewishness or as Gabler (2011:9) puts it ‘Yiddish culture’ or even ‘Jewish sensibility’. Likewise, *Yiddishkei* (טייקשידיי), in the literal sense, refers to the concept of ‘Jewishness’, i.e., ‘a Jewish way of life’, in the Yiddish language. In fact it frequently refers to Judaism or other forms of Orthodox Judaism when employed by pious or Orthodox Jews. Accordingly, it has come to represent the notion of ‘Jewishness’ or ‘Jewish essence’, specifically, of Ashkenazi Jews and the traditional, long-established Yiddish-speaking Jews of, chiefly, Eastern and Central Europe. Clearly, from a more secular viewpoint, it might be related to the popular culture, lore or folk practices of Yiddish-speaking, mainly Ashkenazi Jews, for example, popular and communal religious traditions, Eastern European Jewish

food whose popularity has grown in the United States over the last hundred years, Yiddish sense of humor, the shtetl life, and klezmer music, in Hebrew ‘instrument of a song’. Just before the Haskalah and the emancipation process of Jews in Europe, crucial and fundamental to the *Yiddishkeit* were Torah study and reading as well as Talmudical studies, not just reading, for men, and a family, collective life ruled by the observance of Jewish laws, namely Halakhah, and numerous Jewish customs and traditions for men and women alike. Amongst Hasidic Jews,¹ i.e. those originating from the Haredi Judaism, the Jews of Eastern European descent, who constitute the majority of Jews speaking Yiddish in their everyday lives, the word has preserved this exact meaning. Then again with secularization, the notion of *Yiddishkeit* has come to mean and include not just traditional Jewish religious and moral practices, but a comprehensive range of movements, ideologies, practices, and traditions in which Ashkenazi Jews have partaken and retained their unique sense of ‘Jewishness’. *Yiddishkeit* might be identified in a characteristic manner of speech, in a bitter sweet flair and sense of humor, in an emotional connection and identification with the Jewish people. Finally, Gabler (2011:11) explains:

In effect, Yiddishkeit isn't a thing or even a set of things. , an idea or a set of ideas, which may explain why Yiddishkeit is itself so sprawling, kaleidoscopic, disjointed, eclectic, and just plain messy. You really can't define Yiddishkeit neatly in words or pictures. You sort of have to feel it by wading into it.

Assimilation: different approaches

Let us commence with the overview of different approaches to the idea of assimilation in the United States. As pointed out by Alba and Nee (2003:2): *The assimilation concept of the earlier era is now condemned for the expectation that minority groups would inevitably want to shed their own cultures, as if these were old skins no longer possessing any vital force, and wrap themselves in the mantle of Anglo-American culture.* What we can observe is the *one-sidedness*, according to Alba and Nee (2003:5), of this conception which disregarded the value and sustainability of minority cultures in the United States and, what is more, concealed hardly hidden traditionally-viewed *ethnocentric* assumptions about the superiority of Anglo-American culture, especially at the beginning of the 20th century. Undeniably, it has been seen as a form of *Eurocentric hegemony*, which is a weapon of *the majority for putting minorities at a disadvantage by forcing them to live by cultural standards that are not their own* Alba and Nee (2003:5). The scholars quote Warner and Srole (1945) who conclude that American ethnic groups

¹ This can be found in Williamsburg which is a part of New York City borough of Brooklyn and is inhabited by a significant number of approximately 100.000 Hasidic Jews.

are destined to be no more than temporary phenomena, doomed by the egalitarian values of the United States and by widespread social mobility. They claimed that:

The future of American ethnic groups seems to be limited; it is likely that they will be quickly absorbed. When this happens one of the great epochs of American history will have ended. Paradoxically, the force of American equalitarianism, which attempts to make all men American and alike, and the force of our class order, which creates differences among ethnic peoples, have combined to dissolve our ethnic groups (Warner and Srole 1945:295).

As pointed out by Warner and Srole (1945:4), the force of American equalitarianism, which tries to make all men American and identical, and the force of the *class order, which creates differences among ethnic peoples, have combined to dissolve our ethnic groups*. As part of this assimilation process, ethnic groups must, according to the authors, *unlearn* their cultural traits, which are *evaluated by the host society as inferior*, in order to *successfully learn the new way of life necessary for full acceptance*. Warner and Srole (1945) correlated the potential for speedy assimilation with a hierarchy of racial and cultural adequacy, ranging from English speaking Protestants, at the top, to *Negroes and all Negroid mixtures* at the bottom, which is even more noteworthy to the present-day viewpoint of assimilation. At the beginning of the twentieth century to be assimilated meant to identify with middleclass Protestant whites.

The present approach to the concept, the Chicago School definition of that phenomenon, views assimilation as a process by which members of an ethnic group, Jews in this case, in *a diverse mainstream society, in which people of different ethnic/racial origins and cultural heritages, evolve a common culture that enables them to sustain a common national existence* (Alba and Nee 2003:2). Thus the mainstream culture, which is highly variegated in any event, i.e. by social class, region or religion, among other factors, changes as elements of the cultures of the newer groups are incorporated into it.

The composite culture that we identify with the mainstream is made up of multiple interpenetrating layers and allows individuals and subpopulations to forge identities out of its materials to distinguish themselves from others in the mainstream, i.e. Jews in New York City or Los Angeles with their *Jewishness*, in ways that are still recognizably American.

Religion and Jewish Languages voiced in *Yiddishkeit*

One of the concepts of assimilation is learning a new language. Learning English has been essential for assimilation in America. However, to be recognized as an American Jew, you need to possess a command of so called *Jewish English*.

It must be mentioned that Jewish English has so far received no open recognition among the Modern Orthodox as a significant cultural entity. Nevertheless, its use appears to be established, and formal recognition of its role in the community may not be far off. Next to Yiddish and Hebrew, Jewish English is recognized in this group as an expression of *Yiddishket* or Jewishness. Interestingly, the individual who fails to understand or communicate in this form of speech is spotted as an outsider. Thus, there are considerable cultural pressures motivating members of the group to use Jewish English as the standard medium of intragroup communication. In Modern Orthodox day schools and yeshivas, for example, the use of this mixed language is actively encouraged, as in the following statement by an Orthodox educator who says that [...] *although students should know how to refer to these items in English, the norm should be Motzaei Shabbos-not Saturday night, daven-not pray, bentsch-not recite Grace After Meals, Yom Tov-not holiday* (Steinmetz 2001:84). Because of the great emphasis on religious education among the Orthodox, their educational institutions (ranging from nursery schools all the way to higher theological academies) are focal points in the perpetuation and dissemination of Jewish English. Yeshiva faculties consist in the main of bilinguals who regularly intersperse Yiddish and Hebrew words and expressions in their English, and the resulting hybrid forms are adapted and internalized by their pupils and reinforced by repetition. On the whole, however, yeshiva talk is a somewhat specialized form of Jewish English, as it contains a good deal of Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic elements of an academic and scholarly nature which do not frequently surface in the more homely speech of average Orthodox men and women. More representative of common usage is the type of Jewish English printed in the English-language (loosely called Anglo-Jewish) periodicals of the American Orthodox community. For example, according to Gold (1985a:282), the need to express Jewish experience is the reason why there are so many Jewish varieties of English. First and foremost, Jews are inclined to use certain lexical items to express the peculiarities of their daily existence. They use such words as *Shabes clocks* ‘a clock which shows when the Shabes begins and finishes,’ *yortsal calendar* ‘anniversary’ or *matse-meal* ‘a brittle, flat piece of unleavened bread eaten during Passover’. Thousands of words and expressions have been taken from Yiddish and Hebrew to designate the host of things and activities that pertain to Orthodox Jewish living. The body of borrowings includes, for example, terms pertaining to marriage: *shiduch* ‘match’, *shadchen* ‘matchmaker’, to be *meshadech* ‘make a match’, *zivig* ‘destined match or mate,’ *nadan* ‘dowry’, *chasene* ‘wedding’; terms relating to death: *levayah* ‘funeral’, *hesped* ‘eulogy’, to be *maspid* ‘eulogiz’, *ovel* ‘mourner’, *niftar* ‘the deceased’, *matzevah* ‘gravestone’; terms dealing with study: *talmid* ‘student’, *talmid chochom* ‘learned person’, *melamed* ‘teacher’, *limud* ‘learning, study’, *limude kodesh* ‘sacred studies’, *lamdan* ‘scholar’, all of these lexical items are of the same Hebrew root; terms of kinship: *zeide* ‘grandfather’, *bobbe* or *bubbe* ‘grandmother’, *tate* ‘father’, *mame* ‘mother’, *mechutonim* ‘in-

laws', *shver* 'father-in-law', *shviger* 'mother-in-law', *aynikel* 'grandchild'; designative and descriptive terms: *balebos* 'male head of household', *baleboste* 'female head of household', *balebatish* 'respectable', *freilach* 'merry' (also 'a kind of folk dance'), *shochen* 'neighbor', *shutef* 'partner', *chaver* 'companion, friend', *prostak* 'coarse person', *prost* 'coarse, vulgar'.

Many of the nouns that make up the largest class of Yiddish loanwords have synonyms taken from Hebrew and sometimes also equivalent forms in English. For example, *yarmulka* 'skullcap' is interchangeable with Hebrew-derived *kippah*, *shvartze* 'blacks' with *shechorim*, *frum* 'religious' with *dati*, *Yiddishkeit* 'Jewishness' with *Yahadus* (or *Yahadut*), *becher* 'wine cup' with either Hebrew *kos* or the Jewish-English hybrid *kiddush cup*. The increasing popularity of Hebrew is also reflected in the tendency to spell (but not necessarily pronounce) Yiddish words of Hebrew origin according to their Modern Hebrew or Sephardic pronunciation. Thus, the familiar *Shabbos* 'Sabbath' will often be spelled *Shabbat* (as in a *Shabbat party*, a *Shabbat meal*), and words like *ovel* 'mourner', *bris* 'circumcision', *tallis* 'prayer shawl', and *mikveh* 'ritual bath' are frequently rendered as *avel*, *brit*, *tallit*, and *mikvah*. The influence of Hebrew is reflected in the conversational fragment, where a child typically addresses her father with the Modern Hebrew word for 'daddy,' *abba*, although the other Jewish words she uses are clearly from Yiddish. Interestingly, a number of Yiddish nouns have plurals, such as *-im* and *-lech*, and although words with these endings have been transferred to English as unanalyzed forms, they have also been adapted into the English plural system, thus producing many variant pairs, such as, for example, *sefers*, formed upon Hebrew *seforim* 'sacred books', *sefer Torahs*, *sifre Torah* 'Torah scrolls', *shiurs*, *shiurim* 'lessons, lectures' and *kneidels*, *kneidlech* 'dumplings'. The first element of each of these pairs was formed by replacing the Yiddish suffix with the English plural *-s*. Another typical adaptation of Yiddish loanwords is the replacement of diminutives such as *-l*, and *-ele* (Yiddish has an abundance of them) with the English diminutive *-ie* or *-y* (but often spelled *-i* in Jewish English). Thus, *keppele* 'small head' has acquired the variant *keppy*, and common Yiddish forenames such as *Yosl* or *Yosele*, *Yankl* or *Yankele* have been Anglicized to *Yossi* and *Yanky*.

Yiddishkeit can also be mirrored in the characters of various types of 'bunglers' or 'fools', namely *shlemiel*, *shlemazl*, *shlump*, *shnuk*, *shmenderik*, *shmigegge*, *shmo*, *nebish*, *klutz*, etc. (on this issue see Steinmetz 2001:2). Note that some of these terms are also spoken in the environs and neighborhoods outside those, mainly, Jewish English speakers. For instance, *shlemiel* as 'an awkward, clumsy person, a blunderer'; 'a born loser'; 'a dope' or 'drip'. This definition might imply that the person who is called *shlemiel* is 'an unfavorable one', but the two famous books written on the subject agree on the importance and significance of this kind of character in Jewish history, tradition and literature.

Namely, Sanford Pinsker discusses, in his *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Fiction* (1991) the origin of what he calls the

Schlemiel Family tree to the biblical story of *Schlumiel ben Zurishaddai*, and that episode was later enlarged and elaborated in the Talmud. In this story Pinsker (1991:256) detects the elements of *castration anxiety involving sexuality and rebellion against authority figures*. The author points out that the *shlemiel* character that appeared as a key figure from out of the Yiddish literature of the East European ghettos and shtetls in the late 19th century was forced by continual defeats and downfalls to look on his life from a bittersweet perspective and to develop the type of ‘laughter through tears’ humor. In *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* Wisse (1971) follows the recurrent theme of the *shlemiel* in Jewish literature from a simple beginning of the character as the East European *shtetl* lout, through the works Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem, his migration to the New World, and emergence there in the writing of American Jewish authors as, for example, Saul Bellow.² In the work of Sholem Aleichem, she states that *Jews become a kind of schlemiel people powerless and unlucky, but psychologically they are the victors in defeat* (see Wisse 1971:36). Another interesting character which is present in American culture is *schmuck*. Bluestein (1998:101) informs us that – according to a folk etymology – the word *schmuck* is an acronym that has been formed upon the Hebrew *shma kolaynu* ‘hear our voices’. *Schmuck* has also entered American speech through euphemisms often used by people who have no idea of the original meaning or connotations. The scholar notes that the best known are *shmo/shmoho* and *shmohawk*, all of which mean ‘stupid’; the last one is also a derisive reference to a nonexistent tribe of Jewish Indians (see Bluestein 1998:102). Yet, as observed by the scholar, many people who use *schmuck* on day-to-day basis clearly have no idea of well-pronounced obscene connotations, e.g., Charles Schulz had a *Peanuts* sequence in which Lucy invented a new pitch called a *schmuckleball*. The sequence merely lasted a few days before – as someone explained to Schulz – what he had blundered into (see Bluestein 1998:102). Yet, Eisenberg and Scolnic (2006:155) point out that in contemporary Am.E. usage the word *schmuck* is frequently used with reference to someone who allows himself to be taken advantage of, and the word is more insulting than both *shmo* and *shnook*.

Conclusions

To sum up, given the composite culture model, *Yiddishkeit* can be expressed in terms of assimilation in American culture. It is a notion that transcends Jewish religion, tradition, language and culture and has become indivisibly woven into the American culture and society since it arrived with Jewish immigrants. It seems that

² Saul Bellow was Jewish American novelist, fluent in Yiddish both in speaking and in writing, whose characterization of modern urban citizen dissatisfied by society but not ruined in spirit earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976.

assimilated Jews are aware of their own distinctive cultural heritage, represented in religion and Jewish English. Yet, one may only predict the fate and future of *Yiddishkeit*. As accurately observed by Furman (1987:23):

Given the Jewish experience in America, it may be suggested that America has offered the Jews the greatest possibility for safety and prosperity that they have encountered in a non-Jewish land. The openness of American society has also proved to be the most difficult dilemma for Jewish continuity, since the very ease of assimilation threatens Jewish survival. The nature and quality of Jewish survival is another major issue confronting American Jewish life today. As modern people, Jews have broken with the “sacred canopy” of their ancestors, thereby breaking with the very tradition that gave meaning to Jewish identity. The content of American Jewish identity is consequently complex and variable. The sources of Jewish community are equally complex, no longer automatic in the face of individual freedom from group control. The fate of the Jewish people, no longer sealed in the distant past, thus rests in the lives, actions, and volition of individual Jews and their voluntary associations.

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