Israelis tune into rap music

Composer sparks interest in language

By EDITH CORON
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JERUSALEM — A syncopated rhythm pounds behind an electric guitar in what sounds like a concert of modern music. But the words are an anachronism: They are sung in Yiddish. Mendi Kahane, a young Israeli composer, has launched a style until now unheard of: Yiddish rap.

"Yiddish is very much alive. Millions of people still speak it. I'm not trying to revive a dead language," says the musician, who also studies Yiddish at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. "I see it as looking at a living thing and trying to become more alive myself by using it."

Mr. Kahane's creation is symptomatic of a renewal of interest in Israel, and in the rest of the world, in a language that was thought to be disappearing over the past 50 years. An increasing number of theater and film festivals and concerts are trying to save one of the Jewish world's richest heritages. At the same time, hundreds of students at universities in England, France, the United States, and Israel are learning about a 1,000-year-old culture that played a crucial role in preserving the patrimony of European Judaism.

Yiddish will probably never fully recover the status and vitality it enjoyed before World War II, when the majority of the 11 million European Jews then alive were using it daily. Specialists cannot give precise figures of the number of Yiddish speakers around the world today. "But we know that Yiddish is still a language of communication particularly in many ultra-Orthodox communities in New York, Antwerp, Paris, and in Israel," says Alain Alvarez Pereir, who studies oral Jewish languages for the French National Center for Scientific Research.

Yiddish carries a people's history. Born in the late 9th and 10th centuries in the Rhine region of Lotharingia (a former kingdom that included the Alsace-Lorraine area of modern France), Yiddish's evolution testifies to the fate of the European Jewish communities throughout 1,000 years.

The steps in the formation of Yiddish, a so-called language of fusion, correspond to the major events, persecutions, and migrations that affected Jews. Yiddish began as a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, which remained the Jews' holy languages, and the dialects of the cities where they were then settled: mainly Germanic languages in south Germany and Romance languages in northern France and Italy.

Starting in the 13th century and the massive migrations, toward the East, some elements of Slavic languages started to influence Yiddish. Five centuries later, Yiddish was spoken from Switzerland to the Baltic Sea and from Alsace to Russia.

In the 19th century, pogroms, anti-Semitism, and hard economic times brought about new waves of emigration from Europe. Hundreds of thousands of Jews went to North and South America, taking their language with them. Despite a period of intense literary activity in the 1920s and '30s, however, Yiddish seemed doomed to disappear. It was largely overwhelmed by brutal repression in the former Soviet Union, by assimilation in the American melting pot, and by annihilation in the Holocaust. In 1948, Yiddish was spoken by only 5 million to 6 million people.

Paradoxically, Israel dealt Yiddish its final blow. Yiddish lost the language battle in which it was pitted against Hebrew. The fight was particularly fierce within the Zionist movement over the choice of a language for the Jewish people and its future state.

Hebrew won, and Yiddish has become a symbol, at times even a caricature, of the Jews of the Diaspora. The winners did not hide their contempt.

Hava Tourniansky, professor of Yiddish literature at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, recalls a well-known incident. "A Holocaust survivor was describing to Israel's first prime minister the horrors of the concentration camps: 'Why does he have to speak in such a horrible language?' asked David Ben-Gurion," she recounts. "It was a deep ideological conflict which died when Hebrew became the national language," Mr. Pereir says. "But one has to remember that it had before reached such an intensity that a 'language police' even existed to impose Hebrew on the new immigrants."

Only in 1951 was a chair in Yiddish opened at Hebrew University, even though financial resources had been available since 1926. "The hegemony of Hebrew was by then unchallenged. And nowadays, Yiddish is taught in the Israeli public school system but only as a third language. It comes after English," Mrs. Tourniansky laments.

The use of Yiddish disappeared little by little in Israel.

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Residents walk in Mea Shearim, the ultra-Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem. Because Orthodox Jews regard Hebrew as sacred, many prefer to speak Yiddish, like their European ancestors.

For a decade, Tourniansky has had to teach the first two years of her course in Hebrew: "Nowadays students have to learn the language before they can get a grasp of the literature," she says.

But Tourniansky is happy to note that about 200 books are published in Yiddish every year.

In the Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities, Yiddish has never lost its supremacy. These groups have refused to corrupt Hebrew, the sacred language, by using it in daily life. Their stand grew even firmer when Hebrew became the official language of a state they regard as heretical. For them, the restoration of the Jewish people in Israel cannot precede the arrival of the Messiah they are expecting.

The ultra-Orthodox communities have produced a vast quantity of material in Yiddish, traditional Talmudic commentaries, pedagogical texts, and newspapers, and they have adapted their language to modern technologies. Sermons in Yiddish of influential rabbis are reproduced on audio and video cassettes.

By an ironical twist of history, ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel can now speak Yiddish with people they never expected to meet. Among the half-million new immigrants who have arrived in the last four years from the former Soviet Union, many older people, rather than learning Hebrew, often find it easier to recall their Yiddish, however rusty or sketchy it may be. It has survived 70 years of communist repression.

Leonid Levin, a tailor from Sverdlovsk, Russia (renamed Ekaterinburg), found a job in a tailor shop in Mea Shearim, the ultra-Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem where time seems to have stopped 200 years ago in Eastern Europe. "I hadn't spoken Yiddish since I was 15. It's like going backwards," he says.

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