

FORUM RESPONSE

Benjamin D. Sommer

I am struck by an interesting difference regarding a language requirement in these majors. Three of these majors (including Indiana and Vassar) require Hebrew; two require either Hebrew or Yiddish. The question of language requirements implicates both how we construct the field of Jewish studies and how undergraduate majors should relate to that academic construction, so I will devote my brief response to some thoughts on this issue.

Should a major in Jewish studies have a language requirement at all? If so, what languages should fulfill that requirement? If one answers the first question in the negative, then one constructs Jewish studies in a particular fashion. For such a construction, direct access to classics of Jewish literature and thought not written in English is not a major desideratum. Further, this construction is especially useful if one seeks to reject the notion of a canon: after all, the judgment that, say, Amos Oz is somehow more important as a Jewish writer than Philip Roth, or S.Y. Agnon than Nelly Sachs, may be nothing more than a hegemonic assertion of one's own values. An insistence on a language requirement may thus function to reinforce some sort of canon.

Alternatively, one may view a language requirement as a hermetic attempt to keep Jewish studies an elite field, inaccessible to the masses of American undergraduates. Hence

a repudiation of such a requirement might be seen as an exercise in demystification. In an era that celebrates transgressing disciplinary boundaries, some may welcome such a repudiation. Of course, scholars who believe that discipline is a good thing will demur. I for one am pleased to note that all five of these programs fit into the latter category.

If a program does institute a requirement, should Yiddish fulfill it? There is no question that Yiddish is an important Jewish language. On the other hand, so is Arabic, and thus if one can use Yiddish to fulfill this requirement, I cannot see why one would not be allowed to use

documents of several Jewish cultures is already ensured for anyone who knows Arabic, German, or English as much as is the case for someone who knows Yiddish.

Could one, on the other hand, construct an argument that Hebrew is *sui generis*, that it is central to Jewish studies in a way that Yiddish, Arabic, German, and English are not? A religious argument would of course be invalid in an academic context; there is no academic argument that makes the Bible more important than Martin Buber, or Mishna more important than Mendelssohn. But there are two reasons that Hebrew is uniquely



Reprinted from *Foygl kanarik* by Moyshe Shifris. New York, 1950, p. 13. Courtesy of Jeffrey Shandler.

Arabic (perhaps with the caveat that one semester has to be devoted to the study of a Jewish text in Arabic). German is also a tremendously important Jewish language: literature, philosophy, religious thought, and of course an enormous amount of archival material of interest to Jewish historians is written in German. The same can be said of English: it too is a vital Jewish language. Thus an argument that Yiddish can fulfill this requirement could put one on a slippery slope that leads to an argument that there should not be a language requirement for native English speakers. Direct access to an enormous number crucial

pivotal for Jewish studies as an academic field. First, Hebrew is the one language that all Jewish communities have utilized. Yiddish speakers rarely read texts in Arabic. Few contemporary American Jews record their thoughts in Ladino. No French synagogues or communal organizations keep their records in Judeo-Persian. But at least some Jews in almost every period and region viewed Hebrew texts as central to their identity, even if (think, for example, of a Hebrew poet such as Tchernikhovsky) they deliberately set out to reject the religious authority of those texts or (think of Yehuda Amichai) to deflate those texts' pretensions. Second,

Hebrew is the central language of modern Jewish scholarship; a scholar who cannot read Tarbiz or Zion cannot be fully or responsibly in dialogue with the field.

The issue I raise is a delicate one. Lurking behind arguments as to whether Yiddish should or should not join Hebrew as a required language are religious and antireligious polemics. Complex sensibilities regarding the relationship of diaspora to the State of Israel and mixed feelings regarding Zionist projects impinge on this issue as well. Moreover, a great many faculty members affiliated with Jewish studies programs in North America do not themselves know Hebrew, which complicates any discussion of this issue in tense and very personal ways. Both sorts of concerns—commitments regarding religion or Zionism, and anxieties about one's own place or legitimacy within the field—should be set aside in a discussion of fitting requirements of an academic field. As Americans increasingly come to realize the

problematic nature of their monoglot culture, it is heartening to know that all the programs in this forum require the study of languages: part of coming to know something foreign (and most Jewish cultures are foreign to any sort of American student, whether Jewish or non-Jewish) is grappling with a foreign language. Scholars and teachers in the field may want to engage in a discussion of the proposition that for students of Jewish cultures generally (as opposed to, say, history majors concentrating on eastern European Jewish history or philosophy majors concentrating on medieval Jewish thinkers, who are in different

situations altogether) no other language is as important as Hebrew.

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