

Kheyder Days

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/kheyder-days>.

Introduction

Kheyder (meaning “room” in Hebrew) was the first educational setting for Jewish boys (and sometimes girls) in the *shtetlekh* (small towns) and cities of Eastern Europe. Often around one wooden table in the house of the *melamed* (teacher), a small class would spend its days learning the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and lessons from the Torah, beginning at the tender age of three. Chief educational techniques were rote memorization and recitation. The *kheyder* experience, which represented a child’s formal entrance into the Jewish world and its ancient teachings, was a formative one, and features prominently, though not always positively, in Yiddish literary works. Through this resource kit, students will learn about (and even experience) some of the unique customs of the *kheyder*, the centrality of education in Jewish culture, and the atmosphere of *shtetl* life.

Subjects

Childhood, Eastern Europe, Jewish Education, Religion, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- The “*Heder*” article (by Mordechai Zalkin, translated from Hebrew by Barry Walfish) from the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* is an excellent overview with historical photographs.
- *Photographing the Jewish Nation: Pictures from S. An-sky’s Ethnographic Expeditions* (Brandeis University Press, 2009) compiles some of the research and photography gathered by ethnographer-playwright S. An-ski and his team in their 1912-1914 journeys through *shtetlekh* in what is now the Ukraine. Take special note of Chapter 3, “The Jewish Nursery: Educating the Next Generation,” which features remarkable photographs of *khadorim* and other venues of traditional Jewish learning, with an introduction by Alexander Lvov.
- For a wider view of *shtetl* life, see Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern’s *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in East Europe*, a recent look at the *shtetl* during the years 1790-1840, when Jews lived in relative peace amongst their neighbors in the Pale of Settlement.

Resources

1: Music, lyrics, and recording (ca. 1960) of Bronx schoolchildren singing Mark Varshavski’s “Oyfn pripetshik” (ca. 1901), Yiddish with translation.

This song, “*Oyfn pripetshik*” (“On the Hearth”)—perhaps the most well-known and beloved in all of Yiddish music—is often thought to be from the folk tradition, but was in fact written by Mark Varshavski (1848-1907), a lawyer-turned-songwriter from Kiev who was discovered by famed Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem. In the composition, originally published as “*Der alef beys*” (“The Alphabet”), the cozy atmosphere of the *kheyder* is set off by the melancholy melody and the lyrics that grow more plaintive as the song progresses. Interestingly, this recording features first-graders from a Yiddish school in the Bronx—young children, like the characters of the song. Note that the “*rebe*” (as the *melamed* was often called) urges the children to learn with “*groys kheyshek*” (great enthusiasm)—the same word used by Sholem Aleichem in a text that appears later in this kit, to describe what the *kheyder* boys precisely did not have.

Suggested activity: Play the song and have the students follow along with the Yiddish lyrics. Read the summarized English translation that appears below them. Discuss the meaning of the song, and what picture it paints of the *kheyder*. Who is the speaker of most of the lyrics? What is the speaker’s attitude to the material being taught, and does it change? After discussing the



lyrics, play the song again, with students singing along—or teach them the song, so they can sing it without using the recording.

Sources: Chana Mlotek, ed., *Mir Trogn a Gezang: The New Book of Yiddish Songs* (trans. *We Bring Forth Song*) (New York: Workmen’s Circle Educational Division, 1972), 2-3.

Mark Varshavski, “*Oyfn pripetshik*,” on *Lomir zingen: Lider far yidishe kinder (Let’s Sing A Yiddish Song!: A Treasury of Popular Children’s Songs)* (trans. *Songs for Jewish Children*), performed by Masha Benya and children’s chorus from Workmen’s Circle School No. 3 (Brooklyn: Famous Records, 1960?). Digitized by Judaica Sound Archives of Florida Atlantic University Libraries, accessed December 10, 2015, http://faujsa.fau.edu/jsa/search_music_LP.php?jsa_num=400694.

2: Photoplate, Roman Vishniac’s “Students discussing the Chumash in cheder,” ca. 1938.

From 1935 to 1938, funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Russian-born American-Jewish photographer **Roman Vishniac** (1897-1990) undertook a documentary expedition in Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. The purpose was to capture Jewish life in the *shtetlekh* and cities there. The pictures are now a precious resource for glimpsing this Ashkenazic civilization on the brink of its destruction at the hands of the Nazis. Vishniac took **the photograph** seen in this artifact in the town of Brod, now part of the Czech Republic. The image was later chemically engraved onto a metal photographic plate, which was then affixed to a wooden block. This antique object would have been used to print the well-loved image onto the pages of books and newspapers.

Suggested activity: Dispatch your students on a photographic expedition of their own. Vishniac endeavored to not only portray people and their activities, but also to somehow capture the soul of his subjects and the interesting circumstances of their lives. Have your students do the same in their school—whether in a classroom, the playground, the hallways, etc. How can they capture the process of learning and the spirit of their environment? Project or share their images, and have the student-photographers present briefly—what was each photographer’s original idea, and how did it change as her “expedition” was underway?

Source: Photoplate: Archive of the Yiddish Book Center, Amherst, MA (photographed by Mikhl Yashinsky, 2016). Original photograph: Roman Vishniac, [Students discussing the Chumash in cheder (Jewish elementary school), Brod], ca. 1938 © Mara Vishniac Kohn, courtesy International Center of Photography.

3: Music, lyrics, and recording of Ruth Rubin singing “Under Yankele’s Cradle,” October 1978, Yiddish with translation.

The text is one of many variants for this lullaby (“*Unter yankeles vigele*”), one of the oldest in the Yiddish corpus. In it, a parent wishes for his child to learn and become a scholar of Torah. This excerpt of renowned folklorist **Ruth Rubin** performing the song is taken from a lecture she gave at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. In her introduction, she claims that the song “*shpiglt of...vi di hofenungen fun di muters un di foters iz geven, az dos yingele...zol dos zayn a talmed khokhem*” (reflects... the hopes of the mothers and fathers, that their boy...should grow up to be a Torah scholar). After finishing her rendition of the song, Rubin paraphrases from a well-known Yiddish proverb that the lyrics quote, saying, “*S’iz geven a tsayt ven toyre iz geven di beste skhoyre*” (It was a time when **Torah was considered the most precious merchandise**).

Suggested activity: Play the recording of Ruth Rubin, who was instrumental in collecting immigrant Jews’ folksongs in the 20th century. Give the students some notion of what to listen for and what the contents of Rubin’s comments are. While playing the song, have the students following along with the provided music, lyrics, and translation. Ask: how does the content of the parent’s words “reflect” the values of shtetl Jews, and in what way are these values connected to Torah learning?

Sources: Chana Mlotek and Mark Slobin, eds., *Yiddish Folksongs from the Ruth Rubin Archive* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 78.

Ruth Rubin, “Ruth Rubin Literary-Musical Evening Part 1,” lecture presented at the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, October 14, 1978. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Frances Brandt Online Yiddish Audio Library, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/audio/ruth-rubin-literary-musical-evening-part-1-october-14th-1978>.

4: Film, Joan Micklin Silver’s “Hester Street,” 1975, Yiddish with subtitles.

This film was based on a novel about immigrant Jewish life in America by Abraham Cahan, editor-in-chief of the Yiddish-language newspaper *Forverts* (*Jewish Daily Forward*). In this clip, an immigrant woman played by Carol Kane watches her pious boarder, played by Mel Howard, teach the *alef-bets* to her son. The style of teaching—repetition after the teacher, and a sing-song delivery—is characteristic of the *kheyder*.

Suggested activity: Watch the clip, then watch it again with the students endeavoring to repeat after the *melamed*, just as the boy does. Have they had any experiences learning this way? How did the students feel while doing so? What are the virtues and drawbacks of such techniques? Understand that this style of rote repetition was not only used to learn the alphabet, but also to study entire sections of Torah.

Source: *Hester Street*, directed by Joan Micklin Silver (1975; Home Vision Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

5: Autobiographical novel excerpt, Sholem Aleichem's "Back from the Fair: Descriptions of Life," 1915, Yiddish with translation.

Sholem Aleichem, the Yiddish author most well-known for his Tevye stories, reminisces about the lax attitudes of the *kheyder* students and the corporal punishments they regularly received, in this excerpt from his novel *Funem yarid*, inspired by his own life. Such memories of pain and punishment in *kheyder* are common in Yiddish literature, whose authors, though they would be the harbingers of a modern Jewish secular culture, were often raised in a traditional environment and received schooling in Torah and Talmud.

Suggested activity: Ask students to compare their experiences in Hebrew or Jewish day school (or any religious school) with those described in such reminiscences of *kheyder*. Did their first exposure to Torah or traditional religious learning interest them or bore them? Do they remember instances of unfair treatment from their teachers? How did they feel about this education in the moment, and how has their reflection on it changed since then? It may be amusing to note that "*kheyder*," as an allusion to the grueling, morning-to-evening routine of the classroom, is also Yiddish slang for "prison."

Source: Source: Sholem Aleichem, *Funem yarid: lebns-bashraybungen (Back from the Fair: Descriptions of Life)* (New York: Nyu-yorker arbeter ring- mitlshul [New York Workmen's Circle High School], 1940), 35-36, trans. Mikhl Yashinsky, 2016. Yiddish original digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, accessed December 10, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/nybc210436>.

6: Memoir excerpt, Peretz Litmann's "The Boy From Munkács: The Story of a Survivor," 1996, translation from Hebrew.

In his memoir of life before, during, and after the Holocaust, survivor Peretz Litmann discusses his childhood growing up in the Hungarian shtetl of Munkács (in Yiddish, Munkatsh; now found in the Ukraine and known as Mukacheve). As Litmann indicates, *khumesh* (the Five Books of Moses) would be learned at *kheyder* thus: read aloud in its Hebrew original, with the recitation being interrupted regularly to render it into Yiddish.

Suggested activity: Of course, we also find reminiscences like this one, of *khadorim* where students and teachers learned together ably and with enthusiasm. Now have your class do the same. Pull out copies of the Hebrew Bible—if the students are able, the Hebrew original, and if not, a translation. Pick any passage, using a suggestion from the students. Now, proceeding verse by verse, have each student read out from the original, pausing every few words to translate into colloquial English. The traditional *kheyder* rhythm for this would be as follows (Ashkenazic pronunciation of the Hebrew original in bold, Yiddish translation in italics): "**Bereyshis** *In onheyb*; **boro eloyhim** *hot got bashafn*; **es hashomayim ve-es ha-orets** *dem himl un di erd.*" (If using a Bible is ill-suited to your classroom, choose any difficult text, like a poem, and work through it accordingly, each student stopping every few words to "translate" the poetic text. The aim is to replicate the rhythms of *kheyder* learning.)

Source: Peretz Litmann, *Ha-na'ar mi-munkatsh: Sipuro shel nitzol (The Boy from Munkács: A Survivor's Story)* (Haifa: 1996), 16-17, trans. in "Prewar Jewish Life in Munkács: A Brief History," Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies, accessed December 4, 2015, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/31/jewish_life_munkacs.asp.

7: Recipe, Fania Lewando's "Poppy Seed Cookies for Tea," 1938, Yiddish with translation.

Litmann was showered with candies when he first arrived at *kheyder*. Other students, on their first day, were obliged to lick a page of Hebrew text onto which the *melamed* had poured honey. Still others had a thankfully less messy experience, their mothers baking them *lekek* (honey cake) or *kikhelekh* (cookies) that were formed into the shapes of Hebrew letters. All of these methods of experiential learning had a single purpose: to impress upon the pupils, from a very early age, the sweetness and joy that comes of studying Torah. This recipe for poppy seed cookies ("*mon-kikhelekh tsu tey*"), such as the mothers in the *shtetl* might have made, was written by Fania Lewando, who operated a famous vegetarian restaurant in Vilna and would later perish in the Holocaust.

Suggested activity: Bake the (pareve) cookies with your class, forming the dough into the shapes of Hebrew letters (such cookie-cutters can be easily ordered [online](#)). While the cookies are baking, you might teach the blessing for Torah learning (in traditional Ashkenazic Hebrew pronunciation, as would have been used in the *khadorim*): "*Borekh ato adoynoy, eloyheynu meylekh ho-oylom, asher kidshonu bemitsvoysov vetsivonu la-asoyk bedivrey toyro*" (Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to engage with the words of the Torah). As you enjoy your treats, think on how delicious it is to learn together, and spare a thought for the boys and girls of those faraway *shtetlekh*, now lost to time.

Source: Fania Lewando, *Vegetarish-dietisher kokhbukh: 400 shpayzn gemakht oysshlislekh fun grinsn (Vegetarian Dietetic Cookbook: 400 Dishes Made Exclusively Out of Vegetables)* (Vilna: G. Kleckina, 1938), 150, trans. Eve Jochnowitz, *Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 142.