

## 2019-2020 Yiddish Matters

This year would bring together a group of Yiddish scholars, visual and performance artists, language teachers and cultural leaders. Given the proliferation of courses and academic programs all over the world, the range of klezmer-inspired camps around this country and abroad, the increase in Yiddish publication in the Hasidic community, Yiddish fusion bands, and the growth in the quality and quantity of scholarly publications and of translations from Yiddish into English, Hebrew, French, German, Polish, Japanese and scores of other languages, this is certainly a timely subject. The National Yiddish Book Center's Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library has revolutionized the study of Yiddish and made its books accessible in unprecedented ways. Searchable archives of Yiddish music and theater now exist. There are hundreds of Yiddish newspapers and journals from around the world that are not indexed or searchable, but projects to digitize them are now underway in Israel and the U.S.; this, too, is changing Yiddish Studies. The combination of people working in diverse fields would allow us not only to assess the current state of Yiddish language and cultural studies, but would also help determine its future directions.

The University of Michigan has emerged as one of the world's leading centers for Yiddish studies and the Frankel Institute is the logical site for a fresh exploration of the linguistic, literary, historical, political, social significance of the language and the varying cultures it engendered and continues to animate. Given its proven commitment to interdisciplinary studies, Michigan would be an ideal place for such explorations. In addition to the obvious contribution this year would make to virtually every discipline that comprises Judaic Studies, it can also offer fresh approaches to translation studies, gender studies, global ethnic studies, linguistics, to considerations of pedagogy and of "minor" or "less-commonly taught languages." For example, recent publications—many of them emerging from this University—have argued for the inclusion of Yiddish and other immigrant languages into the canon of American literary studies. Similarly, the gendering of Yiddish as feminine (and thus domesticated and relegated to the domain of the family from which the mature adult must depart) has become an inescapable consideration in these studies.

Yiddish Studies, like Jewish Studies more broadly, is necessarily multidisciplinary. When Max Weinreich, one of the most important linguists of the twentieth century, identified Yiddish as a "fusion language" and the Jews of Eastern Europe as "an interlinguistic community," he underscored the synergistic connections between the language and not only the people who spoke it but also the cultures and the coterritorial languages with and within which they lived. Whether referred to as "taytsh," "dzhargon," *mameloshn* (the mother's tongue), as Hebrew's rival in the "language wars," or as a dialect, the language has been politicized throughout its history. (It was also Max Weinreich who offered the famous quip "a language is a dialect with an army and navy.") Tensions between the ideologies of Yiddishism (a cultural and political project that refers to much

more than language) and Zionism, or socialism and communism in the U.S. and Eastern Europe, and the processes of assimilation are relevant to this exploration.

More recently, the culture of Yiddish has been and continues to be reclaimed both nostalgically and rigorously through analyses of its extraordinary modernist (some would say post-modernist) literature, Old Yiddish texts, American Yiddish poetry, Russian Yiddish symbolists, musicology, film, and more. The range of Yiddish cultural production has never been adequately considered and this year would thus fill a significant gap. Scholars of Yiddish, like all of the writers, performers and speakers they study, are necessarily multilingual. Most are comparatists, considering the intertextual, inter-linguistic, multicultural milieux in which Yiddish has always thrived.