



## **First preliminary lesson**

ערשטע לעקציע

### **Yiddish : origins and writing**

The Yiddish language was born in the Germanic area between the 11th and 13th century, and has evolved in the Slavic area between the 14th and 16th century. It's the youngest and the most developed of the diaspora Jewish languages. Just as the other Jewish languages like Judezmo, Jewish-Italian, Jewish-Arabic etc, Yiddish is the result of a melting process between the old Hebrew-Aramaic heritage and the languages of the surrounding non-Jewish populations, that is in the case of Yiddish, in a chronological order: Roman medieval languages, the various Germanic dialects of that same time, Ukrainian, Polish, Byelorussian and Russian. In modern times, Yiddish has also adopted quantities of internationally used terms. Nowadays, Yiddish continues to absorb elements of the "strong" language in each country where it is spoken, mainly English and modern Hebrew.

Yiddish is written from right to left. It makes use of the 22 letters of the traditional Hebrew alphabet, but Yiddish uses some of them as vowels, groups some letters in combinations representing diphthongs or consonants that don't exist in Hebrew, and makes distinctions between letters through diacritical signs other than those used in Hebrew. (You can compare this with the various languages written with the latin alphabet: the same letters are used with different functions, sometimes with accents or other diacritical marks.) There is generally a close correspondence in Yiddish between sounds and letters or letter groups. However, some conventions of the traditional Hebrew writing have been kept, like the final forms of some letters or the "silent *alef*". Yiddish words of Hebrew-Aramaic origin are generally written according to the traditional rules of Hebrew writing, which includes the use of some particular letters otherwise not used in Yiddish.

שלום - עליכם !

[ ShOLEM - ALE<sub>Y</sub>KhEM ! ]

Hello !

איך הייס אליעזר.

[ IKh HE<sub>Y</sub>S ELYE<sub>Z</sub>ER ]

My name is Eliezer.

און ווי הייסטו ?

[ UN VI HE<sub>Y</sub>STU ? ]

And what's your name ?

Remark:

Since you don't know for the moment the Yiddish alphabet, we make use here of a "phonetic" transcription with latin letters (that has its own rules, as we will see later).

You can already notice that the punctuation marks in Yiddish are the same as in English.

Another important fact: there are no uppercase or lowercase letters in Yiddish.

Exercise 1 :

1. Let's perform this little dialogue.
2. Answer to the question: UN VI HEYSTU ?

## THE YIDDISH ALPHABET

דער ייִדישער אַלף־בייט

[ DER YIDISHER ALEF-BEYS ]

Printed letter	Name	Sound	Written letter	Comments
א	<i>alef</i>	silent / [A] / [O]	א	see explanations below
ב	<i>beyts</i>	[B]	ב	
בֿ	<i>veys</i>	[V]	בֿ	only in words of Hebrew origin
ג	<i>giml</i>	[G]	ג	
ד	<i>daled</i>	[D]	ד	
ה	<i>hey</i>	[H]	ה	
ו	<i>vov</i>	[U] / [V]	ו	see explanations below
ז	<i>zayen</i>	[Z]	ז	see combinations below
ח	<i>khes</i>	[Kh]	ח	like CH in <u>Bach</u> only in words of Hebrew origin
ט	<i>tes</i>	[T]	ט	
י	<i>yud</i>	[I] / [Y]	י	see combinations below
כ	<i>kof</i>	[K]	כ	only in words of Hebrew origin
כֿ	<i>khof</i>	[Kh]	כֿ	like CH in <u>Bach</u> final form: ך , ךֿ ( <i>langer khof</i> )
ל	<i>lamed</i>	[L]	ל	
מ	<i>mem</i>	[M]	מ	final form: ם , םֿ ( <i>shlos-mem</i> )
נ	<i>nun</i>	[N]	נ	final form: ן , ןֿ ( <i>langer nun</i> )

ס	<i>samekh</i>	[S]	○	
ע	<i>ayen</i>	[E]	⋈	like E in Bed
פ	<i>pey</i>	[P]	⊖	
פֿ	<i>fey</i>	[F]	⊖̄	final form: פֿ, פֿ, פֿ ( <i>langer fey</i> )
צ	<i>tsadik</i>	[Ts]	צ	final form: צ, צ, צ ( <i>langer tsadik</i> )
ק	<i>kuf</i>	[K]	ק	
ר	<i>reysh</i>	[R]	ר	really not like the English "r"
שׂ	<i>shin</i>	[Sh]	שׂ	see combinations below
שׁ	<i>sin</i>	[S]	שׁ	only in words of Hebrew origin
תּ	<i>tov</i>	[T]	תּ	only in words of Hebrew origin
תׁ	<i>sov</i>	[S]	תׁ	only in words of Hebrew origin

### Exercise 2 :

Read aloud the names of the Yiddish letters, in their alphabetical order.

### Exercise 3 :

Find in the Yiddish alphabet five pairs of "twin" letters (differing only by a dot or a bar, both in their printed and written form).

### Exercise 4 :

Find in the Yiddish alphabet four pairs of letters and one triplet that are pronounced the same way.

How would you explain those repeated sounds?

### Exercise 5 :

Identify the letters used in the three sentences of the dialog on page 2.

**RECOGNIZING LETTERS  
and USING the KEYBOARD**

**Exercise 6 :**

1. Type one after the other all the "basic" letters of the Yiddish alphabet and take care to speak aloud the name of each letter :

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

2. Type and name the final forms :

ך ם ן ף ץ

3. Type and read aloud the sentence :

בערל קען גוט רעדן.

**SPECIAL LETTER COMBINATIONS  
and DIACRITICAL MARKS**

**Various sorts of *alef* :**

א	<i>shtumer alef</i>	silent	א	at the beginning of words before the vowels and diphthongs וי, יי, יי, וי and וי
אֿ	<i>pasekh alef</i>	[A]	אֿ	close to A in Ma
אָ	<i>komets alef</i>	[O]	אָ	close to O in For (but shorter)

**The *vov* and its combinations :**

ו	<i>vov</i>	[U]	/	like OO in Hoof becomes וֿ, וֿ ( <i>melupm vov</i> ) when it appears next to וו
וו	<i>tsvey vovn</i>	[V]	//	
וײַ	<i>vov yud</i>	[OY]	ײַ	

**The yud and its combinations :**

י	yud	[I] / [Y]	,	like EE in <u>B</u> ee / like Y in <u>Y</u> ear becomes ' , ' (khirik yud) for disambiguation purpose to make clear when needed that it represents the vowel [I]
יי	tsvey yudn	[EY]	''	like EY in <u>T</u> hey
יִי	pasekh tsvey yudn	[AY]	''	like Y in <u>S</u> ky

**Consonantal combinations :**

דז	daled zayen	[DZ]	צב	like DS in <u>B</u> oards
זש	zayen shin	[Zh]	זש	like ZH in <u>Z</u> hivago
דזש	daled zayen shin	[DZh]	זצב	like J in <u>J</u> ungle
טש	tes shin	[TSh]	שט	like CH in <u>C</u> harles

**Exercise 7 :**

1. Type and name the "sophisticated" characters :

אֵ אִ בֹּ בִּי כֹ כִּי פֹ פִּי שֹ שִּי תֹ תִּי

2. Type and read aloud the following sentences :

דערפֿאַר וואָס איך ניץ אַ קאָמפּיוטער,  
דאַרף איך ניט קיין פען.

(Because I use a computer, I don't need any pen.)

איך ניץ ניט קיין פען  
ווייל איך האָב אַ קאָמפּיוטער.

(I don't use any pen because I have a computer.)

## Exercise 8 :

Try to figure out how the following words are spelled.  
(You may assume that none of them is of Hebrew origin.)

For each word, first read it aloud and then type it with your keyboard. (Notice the apostrophe used here to show tonic accentuation in words where the stress isn't on the next-to-last syllable. This apostrophe should not appear in the "real" spelling.)

BOD GOB ZAT NA DOS GAS SOD ALT TERK KRUG HEZL MUZ  
VASER ShOD LAPE TsU TsUP TsI FLASh FENER PA'REVE EFNT KhATE  
KhITRE GEHA'T MAME TsATsKE ShIKhL OT DO TOP KOP OKREP

HEYBL MEYDL KLEY BAYDL LAYB ShRAY TOYG AZO'Y VOYL

LAKh FLAKhE MEGLEKh HOYKh AHE'YM RAPTEM BOYM BLIML BLUM  
VAYN VEYNEN GEBN LEYGN POFN BASHa'F ZEYF DARF HOYF NUTs  
GEVI'RTs ERGETs

A'RBETN OKSN ESN UN UNTER UMETU'M IKh IN IM EYGNS EYDER  
EYBIK AYKh AYNFAL AYNGEPAKT OYVN O'YSGEPAShET YATKE YUShKE  
YOSL YEGER YUNG YOYKh YAYKhL

YID YIDISh MILYO'N LION FLIEN FRIER DERTsIEN REVOLUTsYE RUIK  
GLIIK VU TsUVUKS

TShEPEN FARTShADET MENTSh ShTShAV BORShTSh ZhURNAL GRIZhEN  
STRUZh DZhONGL