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A-HED

Designing a Flag for Yiddish Takes Chutzpah

Getting everyone to agree on a symbol for the everyday language of Jews from Eastern Europe is no easy task; 'Oh, just put a bagel on it'

By Mike Cherney
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To access courses in French or Japanese, users of language website Duolingo click an image of the French or Japanese flags. When the website decided to develop a course in Yiddish, it found itself in a pickle: What flag should represent a language whose speakers have long been spread around the globe?
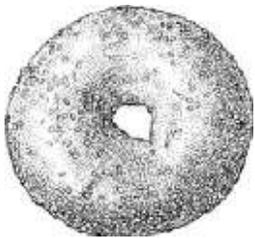
An online survey collected ideas from the public. Some of the recommendations seemed a little meshuga.

"We did get suggestions of Jewish foods, like, 'Oh, just put a bagel on it,' which I just thought was a bit kitschy," said Meena Viswanath, one of the contributors for Duolingo's Yiddish course. Someone else suggested the word "kvetching," written in a circle.

Yiddish, the everyday language of Jews from Eastern Europe, has no widely accepted flag, and some symbols that have come to represent aspects of Yiddish culture—like a peacock —aren't familiar even to many Jews. As interest in the language grows,

Yiddish groups that want to capture public attention with flags and logos are finding it difficult to settle on one.

Meena Viswanath helped Duolingo come up with a new flag design for Yiddish.
PHOTO: GITL SCHAECHTER-VISWANATH

In Massachusetts, the Yiddish Book Center's logo features a goat, an animal that appears in Yiddish literature and art. In San Diego, the Yiddish Arts and Academics Association of North America uses a peacock, another creature from Yiddish writings. A Google search for a Yiddish flag brings up a design of a black menorah on a white background with two black stripes, which academics say appears to be a recent creation.

"Yiddish is a culture, and it's a global culture," said Lisa Newman, director of publishing and public programs at the Yiddish Book Center. "But it didn't have a homeland. So therefore there was no flag."

Yiddish, related to German and written with Hebrew characters, arose about 1,000 years ago and was spoken by millions of Eastern European Jews before the Holocaust. Some scholars estimate between half a million and a million people speak Yiddish now, many of them religious Jews.

The Yiddish translation of 'Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.'
PHOTO: OLNIANSKY TEKST FARLAG

Interest in the language has picked up in recent years. Some universities now offer Yiddish courses and Yiddish cultural festivals are held around the globe. Ms. Viswanath's brother translated the first book in the Harry Potter series into Yiddish, and the first small print run sold-out-quickly-.

In San Diego, the Yiddish Arts and Academics Association of North America wants to update its logo ahead of rebranding itself as Yiddishland California. Founder Jana Mazurkiewicz Meisarosh is considering adding a goat to the peacock in the current logo, though she's not sure how to position the two creatures. One mock-up for a poster shows a peacock playing a fiddle while a goat plays a clarinet—two instruments popular in klezmer, or Jewish folk music.
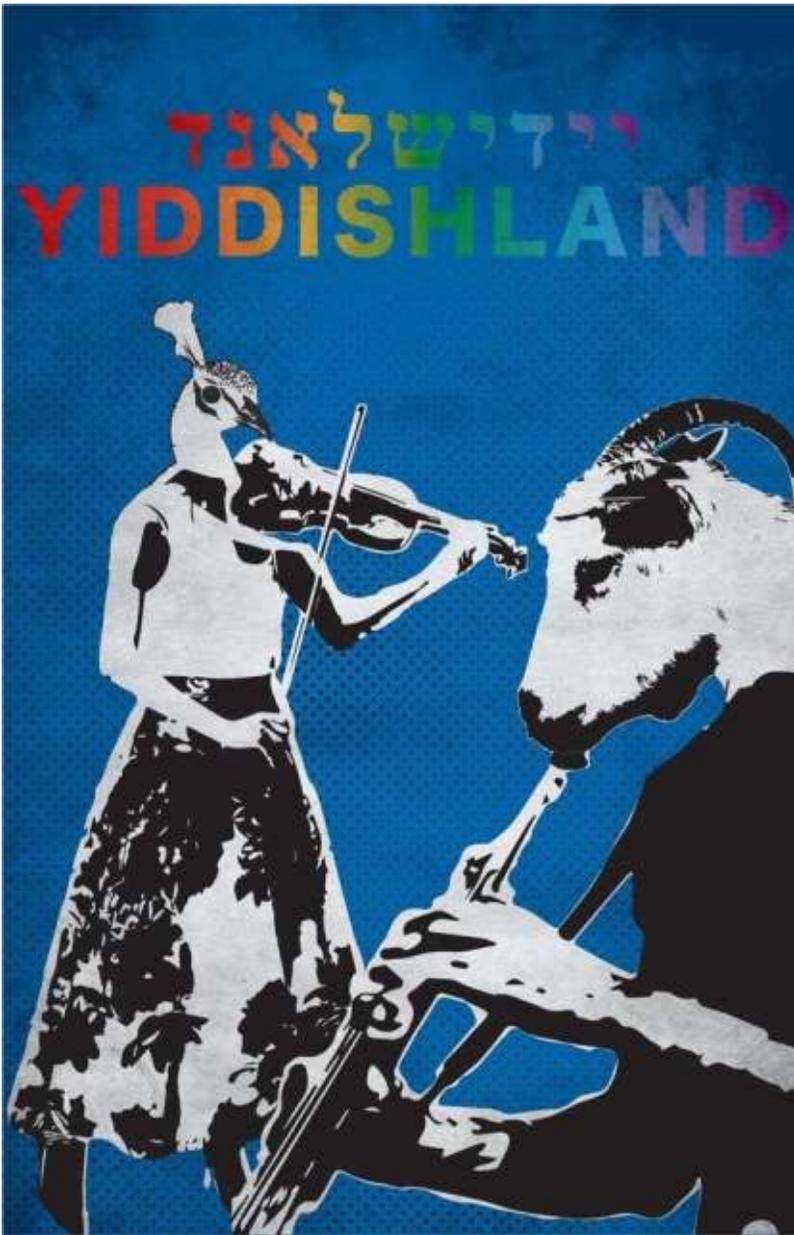
Jana Mazurkiewicz Meisarosh's arts group is considering using both a goat and peacock in an updated version of its logo.
PHOTO: YAAANA

"I like the peacock playing the violin, but I don't know if I like the goat," she said. "I have seen so many logos, my head hurts."

Another suggestion that came to Duolingo was the image of a fiddler on the roof, a reference to the famous Yiddish musical. Other foods for consideration were xugel, a casserole-type dish made with noodles or potatoes, and cholent, a Sabbath stew of meat and potatoes.

Some people suggested variations of flags of European countries, a flag flown by Prague's

Jewish community in the Middle Ages, and a flag that depicts a rainbow from the Jewish

Autonomous Oblast, a region of Russia set aside for Jews during the Soviet Union.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How would you design a Yiddish flag? Join the conversation below.

For Ms. Viswanath, the Israeli flag was off limits because it is associated with Hebrew. Duolingo considered using a peacock, but the peacock looked more like a swan in renderings. Ms. Viswanath also worried the peacock was too obscure.

Duolingo eventually decided on a white komets-alef, which makes an O sound and is one of the first Yiddish letters taught to students. It appears on a blue background.

Prospective designs for Duolingo's Yiddish flag, with the final version at top.
PHOTO: DUOLINGO

The letter also has cultural significance: It's mentioned in the refrain of a well-known Yiddish song about a rabbi teaching children how to read. Ms. Viswanath said the design seemed unlikely to offend people, too. "Yiddish speakers and Ashkenazi Jews are all over the map, in both senses of the word," she said. "I think we came up with the best solution that we could."

Rabbi Dov Muchnik, who learned Yiddish while growing up in Brooklyn, said using an alef makes sense, but he would have dropped the komets, a T-shaped mark that appears underneath the main letter. It makes him think of Hebrew, where it's often used to denote vowel sounds. He also would prefer a black and white color scheme, saying it reminds him of the black ink on parchment of holy texts.

"Somehow it survived 1,000 years with no specific icon," Rabbi Muchnik, the director of the Chabad of Oxnard Jewish Center in California, said of Yiddish. "I don't think there's ever going to be a specific symbol that will say, 'Yes, this is how we're going to identify the language.' "

A 13th-century German prayer book containing early evidence of the Yiddish language at Israel's National Library in Jerusalem.
PHOTO: SEBASTIAN SCHEINER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Yiddish scholar Rebecca Margolis, a professor at Monash University in Australia, would have chosen green for Duolingo's flag to represent the vibrancy of Yiddish. Overall, though, she is verklempt about the design.

"You look at it and you say O," said Prof. Margolis, the director of the university's Australian Centre for Jewish Civilization. "So there you are, you're already speaking Yiddish, which to me is a success right from the very beginning."

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