Introduction: Thematic Issue on Contemporary Haredi Yiddish Worldwide

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Twenty-first century Yiddish, a language that on the eve of World War II was the mother tongue of approximately 11 million speakers, is now spoken as a vernacular primarily, and almost exclusively, in Haredi, mostly Hasidic, Jewish communities around the world (see Fig. 1). This thematic issue of the *Journal of Jewish Languages* is about their language – its grammatical rules, the attitudes of its speakers towards it (including those of people who have left the Haredi world), and the pedagogical practices the community adopts for teaching the language to community members who did not grow up speaking Yiddish at home.

Despite the persistent belief held by many outside of the Haredi world, Yiddish is a thriving vernacular and written medium in most Hasidic communities as well as in some non-Hasidic sectors of Haredi society. First and foremost, it is subject to widespread intergenerational transmission. Holman & Holman's (2002) sociological survey of the Stamford Hill (London, UK) Hasidic community can be taken as more or less representative of the communities in the other Hasidic centers (Antwerp, Belgium; the New York area, USA; Montreal, Canada; and the Israeli communities). They found that 76% of women and over 80% of men and children claim to speak Yiddish. In addition, about half of the community's households self-proclaim to be primarily Yiddish speaking (Holman & Holman 2002: 31, Tables 4.12-13). Similarly, Barrière (2013) has conducted language acquisition studies in the New York Hasidic community and has demonstrated that children in that context acquire Yiddish as their first language in a multilingual setting.

As discussed in, e.g., Fishman (1991), Austin & Sallabank (2011), and Thomason (2015), minority speech communities often experience language loss due to the low prestige that speakers attach to their language. More specifically, minority
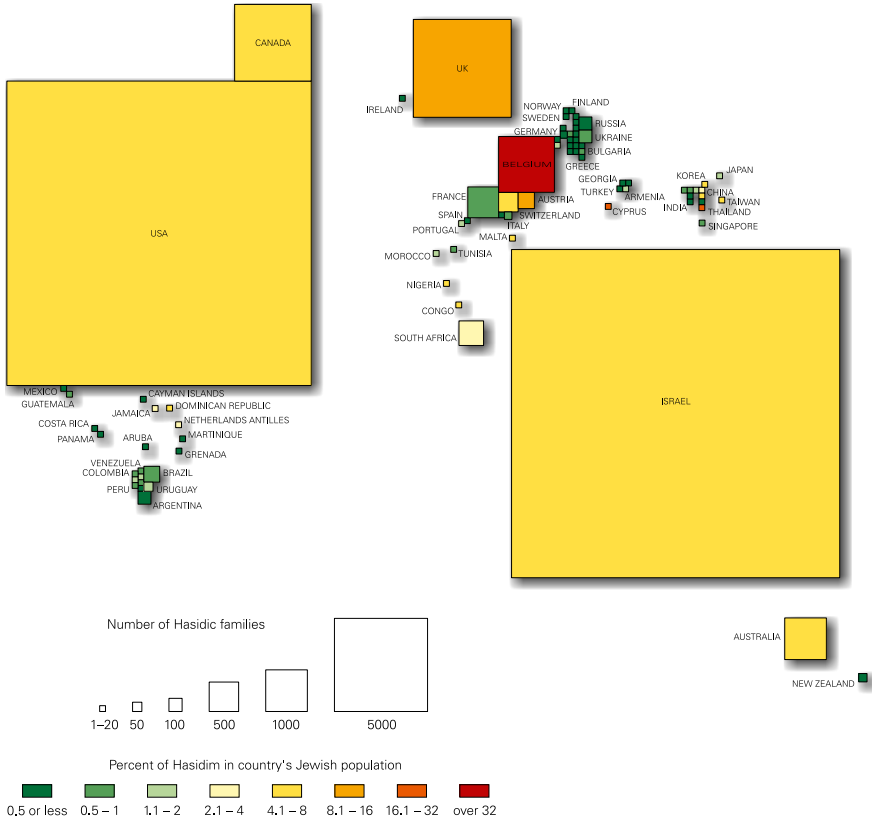
FIGURE 1   Hasidic settlement by country, 2016

language speakers (whether from Indigenous or immigrant communities) often place a high value on integration with the majority society, which is associated with greater chances of success and prosperity for the next generation. This results in ever-decreasing intergenerational transmission, with speakers tending to encourage their children to become proficient speakers of the majority language at the expense of their own heritage language. In addition, communities often lack adequate resources for minority language maintenance in the face of institutional disinterest or hostility. These issues are not applicable in present-day Haredi communities, where speaking Yiddish in the home and raising children in Yiddish is considered to be an asset, while assimilation is perceived negatively. Hence, speaking Yiddish is a practice that

is certainly not in decline; if anything, it is on the rise. Much circumstantial evidence supports this. First, as has been discussed in several previous studies on the subject (Glinert & Shilhav 1991; Bogoch 1999; Fishman 2002; Reiser 2020; and also in the contributions of Belk et al. 2022; Munro 2022, this issue), being a fluent Yiddish speaker is regarded as prestigious in Haredi society. In addition, the availability of a wide variety of Yiddish pedagogical materials (as discussed in Belk et al. 2022) bear witness to the communities' perceived need for helping members of the community acquire the language.

This is a very important fact considering the chances of survival for this minority language. The EGIDS, or Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (https://www.ethnologue.com/about/language-status), is a commonly used tool for assessing linguistic vitality (based on an earlier scale, the GIDS or Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale first proposed by Fishman in 1991). The EGIDS ranks languages on a ten-point scale (with several sublevels) ranging from 10 "extinct," defined as "the language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language" to 0 "international," defined as "the language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy."

The thriving intergenerational transmission of Yiddish in Haredi communities discussed above means that on this criterion alone it can be placed firmly at Grade 6a, 'vigorous', defined as 'the language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable." As Fishman (1991:92) explains, languages on this grade are likely to "continue to survive and, in most cases, even to thrive."

However, at Grade 6a a language is primarily or exclusively used as an oral medium. It is only at Grade 5, "developing," defined as "the language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being produced by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable," that literacy enters the picture. As Fishman (1991:95) explains, literacy contributes to language health because it "facilitates interindividual, internetwork and intercommunal communication and goal attainment and, therefore, also the attainment of RLS [Reversing Language Shift] goals." At Grade 5 the language is a vehicle of literacy in home, school, and community settings. This involves for instance written correspondence between community members that live in geographically different areas. It also involves signs, messaging, and informal publications. There are many examples of these in the Haredi world, in which Yiddish speakers communicate with each other in that language in numerous and diverse written contexts. For example, Yiddish is the standard vehicle of communication between teachers of children and their parents, and between rabbis and their followers.

There is also widespread use of messaging and social media platforms in written Yiddish, including WhatsApp groups of various sizes and online forums like the popular discussion site *Kave Shtiebel* (see Bleaman 2020; Fader 2020). Similarly, there are numerous advertisements, signs, and announcements in Yiddish in and around buildings in Hasidic neighborhoods, one prominent example being *pashkeviln*, information posters issued by community leaders (see Fig. 2).

FIGURE 2   Yiddish *pashkevil* containing Covid-19 advice issued by Haredi
authorities in London's Stamford Hill, March 2020

Moving to Grade 4, "educational," we can also attest that increasingly the language is used in education. This is first and foremost the case in most boys' primary schools and later yeshivas, where Yiddish is often the language through which students learn the Hebrew Bible and Mishnah, and other more advanced Jewish texts such as the Talmud and medieval commentators. However, there is a growing level of Yiddish education for girls too. First, Haredi, and especially Hasidic, girls' schools typically have Yiddish language classes, even if the school does not use Yiddish as the primary medium of instruction. Second, many girls' schools do favor Yiddish-medium instruction, and not only for religious subjects but also often for more secular ones, such as Yiddish essay writing. Yiddish-medium teaching, which has its roots in older Ashkenazic Yiddish-language educational models, has in more recent times served as a model for the design of contemporary pedagogical tools such as published materials for second-language learners of Yiddish in Haredi communities, as Belk et al. discuss in this issue. Such initiatives reflect the ongoing centrality, and therefore vitality, of the Yiddish language in Haredi educational contexts in the 21st century.

Grade 3, "wider communication," is defined as "the language is used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region." Given that Haredi, and particularly Hasidic, communities provide employment to the majority of their members, Yiddish is widely used in work settings, including interactions between staff and customers in local shops, discussions between employees in various community businesses, and in writing on signs, advertisements, price information, promotional materials, and receipts, etc. (although it should also be said that many people report using the majority language in more formal work settings, especially those involving interactions with non-Haredim).

With respect to mass media, there are dozens of Yiddish-language daily, weekly, and monthly magazines for the Haredi market; in addition, most communities maintain regular weekly or even daily community newsletters in the language (e.g., the widely circulated newsletter *Kol Mevasr* in London's Stamford Hill). There is also a thriving Haredi Yiddish-language book publishing industry spanning a wide range of genres including religious works, biographies, popular history, and other non-fiction, in addition to crime novels, comics, and other types of fiction aimed at adult and child readers. While we do not know of any Yiddish-speaking television channels, there are Yiddish-medium YouTube channels designed for Haredi audiences (e.g., the news and current events channel *Yiddishe Vinkel*, which has almost 30,000 subscribers), as well as dial-in services providing Yiddish-language content.

There are also Haredi theatre productions, concerts, films, and other large-scale events performed in Yiddish, especially in the USA and in Israel, where there are enough speakers to maintain these mass industries.

The only criteria that Haredi Yiddish does not meet are those for Grades 2-1 (at which "the language is used in education, work, and mass media" at the provincial and national levels respectively) or Grade 0 (at which "the language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy"). This is because Yiddish does not have national official status in any country, and no local or state governments routinely provide information or conduct their business in the language. However, there are some examples of Haredi Yiddish being used in such contexts. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic many governmental organizations in the UK, USA, and even in Canada provided Yiddish translations of pandemic-related information developed specifically for the benefit of Hasidic communities (see e.g., Fig. 3). Similarly, the Israeli army issued a Yiddish phrase book for the army entering the Haredi neighborhood of Bnei Brak in order to maintain pandemic regulatory compliance. This latter example is extraordinary in at least two senses. First, such a measure recognizes the need for soldiers to address the residents in Yiddish, some of whom, even if they are a small minority, speak little Israeli Hebrew. Second, the move also constitutes a level of recognition of the status of the language by the Israeli state that is unprecedented and therefore significant. In the same vein, in the UK Yiddish has even been used for political campaigning in local elections in the Borough of Hackney, which is home to the Stamford Hill Haredi community, with candidates composing tailored Yiddish-language election materials in coordination with local Hasidic councilors. The fact that politicians felt the need to resort to this measure, despite themselves not having any personal connection to the local Haredi community, recognizes the voting power of a close-knit group with fairly homogeneous political interests, at least when it comes to the level of local government (i.e., they would be in favor of seeking approval for community building projects, etc.). A particularly high-profile example of Haredi Yiddish in the mass media was the recent publication in the New York Times of a lengthy article on Hasidic educational establishments written entirely in the language (Shapiro and Rosenthal 2022b).[1] This article is striking evidence of the vitality of Haredi Yiddish in a Grade 1 context.

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1 The Haredi Yiddish article is an anonymous translation of a simultaneously published English-language original (Shapiro and Rosenthal 2022a). See Golden 2022 for a discussion of the context and content of the Yiddish translation.
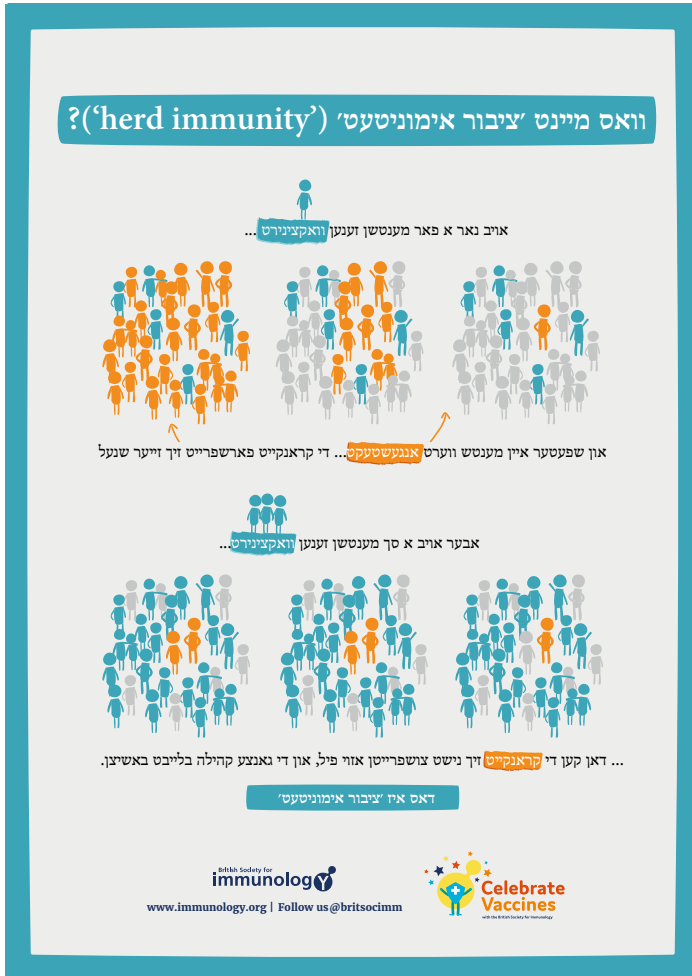
FIGURE 3   Yiddish-language infographic on herd immunity produced
            for the Haredi community in the UK by the British Society for
            Immunology in 2021
            REPRODUCED WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF THE BRITISH
            SOCIETY FOR IMMUNOLOGY

To sum up, we have seen that Yiddish continues to be transmitted and used among Haredi Jews of all generations as a vernacular, in addition to as a written language for public notices and more substantial publications. It is taught in schools and is also used as the primary medium of education in many cases. It is the vehicle of a thriving press, mass media, and is occasionally even employed by majority governments in order to reach out to Haredi communities. This

places Haredi Yiddish firmly near the top of the EGIDs scale. Long may it continue to thrive!

The present thematic issue seeks to highlight this remarkable vitality of Yiddish in Haredi communities around the globe. In this respect it complements the thematic issue of *Journal of Jewish Languages* (Assouline 2018) that was dedicated to American Hasidic Yiddish. Our issue focuses on the diverse ways in which Yiddish is used in the Haredi world, including its major centers in Israel, the UK, Belgium, and Canada, in addition to the United States, and devoting attention to non-Hasidic Haredi groups as well as Hasidic ones. It is hoped that the four articles comprising this issue will help to shed more light on the richness, nuance, and diversity of Haredi Yiddish and stimulate further interest in this dynamic area of contemporary Jewish language scholarship.

Heather Munro's article (Munro 2022) investigates the relationship between the Yiddish language and ethnoreligious identity among Haredi women in Israel from an anthropological perspective. The article contains a detailed history of the politics of Yiddish and Modern (Israeli) Hebrew in Israeli Haredi communities, which provides a helpful framework for those seeking a clearer understanding of the complex and only partially researched relationship between the two languages in this setting. Munro then demonstrates through ethnographic fieldwork that for many Haredi women, including members of both Hasidic and non-Hasidic groups, the role and significance of Yiddish is closely intertwined with political, social, and religious factors, and that an individual Haredi woman's political orientation cannot always serve as an easy predictor of her relationship to Yiddish. Munro's fieldwork data reflect wide-ranging types of female Haredi experience in Israel, including participants from the Karlin, Hornisteipol, and Breslev affiliations, as well as one identifying as 'Hasidic light' and a non-Hasidic Haredi family. Likewise, the participants all have different linguistic backgrounds and levels of Yiddish, ranging from a first-language speaker who grew up in a strict Hasidic household to a *ba'alat teshuva* and a convert who came to the Haredi world later in life and have acquired their Yiddish as adults. Munro's case studies vividly highlight the important fact that in the 21st century, the choice to use Yiddish as opposed to, or in addition to, Modern (Israeli) Hebrew does not always correlate neatly with anti-Zionist sentiments, and that language choice and use is informed by many factors such as a desire to fit into a community, yearning for spiritual advancement, and dedication to one's rebbe, among others. These findings belie the common assumption that Yiddish is primarily the preserve of anti-Zionist Hasidic groups such as Satmar and bring into focus the growing trend for newcomers to a much more diverse range of Haredi communities to adopt the language as their own. Munro's article helps to bring greater nuance to our

understanding of the relationship between the Yiddish language and religious, political, and cultural identity among Haredi women and underscores the reality that this relationship is much richer and more varied than many outside the community typically believe.

Dalit Assouline's contribution (Assouline 2022) presents evidence of an emerging distinction between animate and inanimate subjects in the verbal agreement system of Israeli Haredi Yiddish. Analyzing a corpus of recorded speech, she argues that plural agreement is increasingly triggered exclusively by animate subjects of verbs, while inanimate subjects tend to appear with singular agreement. Interestingly, she even finds a tendency to use plural agreement with collective nouns that may be construed as animate or human, as they represent groups of people (such as states and government organizations). This suggests that animacy is becoming an integral part of the Israeli Haredi Yiddish agreement system. Historically, verbal agreement in Yiddish has been conditioned only by person and number, so the emergence of animacy-based agreement represents an exciting innovation in the language. This study underlines the vitality of Yiddish in Haredi communities in perhaps unexpected ways. Firstly, the fact that innovation is taking place in the language at all indicates that it is undergoing intergenerational oral transmission: new generations of speakers are interpreting the linguistic input they receive in innovative ways and passing those innovations on to their children. Secondly, Assouline's corpus is in part based on recordings of Yiddish-language Israeli "hotlines" – telephone-radio stations broadcast by telephone, run by and aimed at members of Haredi communities. As a form of mass media conducted in Yiddish, they speak to the Grade 3 standing of the language on the EGIDS scale. This study therefore gives us important insight not just to a particular innovation taking place in Israeli Haredi Yiddish, but to the health and outlook for survival of the language as a whole.

Eliyahu Benedict's article (Benedict 2022) examines the use of and attitudes to Yiddish among ex-Haredim in Israel and North America. An important yet severely understudied demographic, former members of Hasidic and other Haredi communities constitute a significant and growing component of the contemporary Yiddish world. Former Haredim occupy a pivotal space within Yiddish-speaking culture between the Haredi and secular spheres, and as such Benedict's examination of their relationship to Yiddish offers us fascinating insights into this community. First, Benedict provides a detailed estimate of the numbers of ex-Haredim worldwide, as well as a discussion of the proportion of Yiddish speakers among them. He then offers a thorough analysis, based on an extensive range of surveys and interviews with Yiddish-speaking former Haredim, of the speakers' personal reasoning for either maintaining or

abandoning Yiddish following their departure from Haredi society. Benedict also provides a quantitative analysis of the continuing use of Yiddish among former Haredim, concluding with an exploration of the ways in which institutional support could help strengthen these trends and provide a bridge between Haredi and secular use of Yiddish. The article concludes by evaluating the potential trends regarding use of Yiddish among the children of Yiddish-speaking former Haredim, noting that almost half of participants showed a desire to transmit the language to the younger generation and that greater institutional support (e.g., availability of secular Yiddish-speaking schools) would greatly increase the likelihood of them doing so. Benedict's findings highlight the importance which former Haredim tend to place on Yiddish and point to a need for further support to help nurture new generations of Yiddish speakers from this demographic, which would have a significant and positive impact on Yiddish vitality in the secular world.

Zoë Belk, Eliyahu Benedict, Lily Kahn, & Sonya Yampolskaya (Belk et al. 2022) review a representative range of bilingual publications aimed at teaching Yiddish to a variety of child and adult Haredi audiences. They give a thorough overview of how such textbooks tackle issues of orthography, morphological case and gender on nouns, adjectives, and pronouns, as well as lexical and cultural issues. They find that five of the six reviewed publications use inductive rather than deductive teaching mechanisms, which have deep roots in the Ashkenazic tradition of *taytsh*, i.e., the traditional study of Hebrew through reading, translating word-for-word, and interpreting texts aloud. They also find that the publications to some extent reflect the large-scale grammatical variability present in contemporary Haredi Yiddish, but that the authors, who all seem to be grass-roots Yiddish-language teachers and enthusiasts rather than professionally trained grammarians, tend to impose conservative and somewhat ad hoc standards that they consider to be prestigious forms of the language. Thus, the publications reveal a clear awareness of the differences between spoken and written forms of Haredi Yiddish, but as the actual representation of the high-register written standard differs from publication to publication, the overall picture that emerges points to the lack of a unified standard at present. Belk et al. provide specific information on the topic of Yiddish language teaching in the Haredi world, which has not been subject to scholarly attention. This is an important topic, given the centrality of education to the health of a minority language. Their findings support the overall view that Yiddish in the Haredi world is a thriving language, as they reflect a flourishing market for bilingual pedagogical materials aimed at newcomers in the community as well as children, especially girls, in Haredi education.

Nevertheless, the nature and quality of the publications also reveal that institutional support for the creation of such publications from within the community is limited and that outside state support is non-existent.

As we have highlighted in this introduction, contemporary Haredi Yiddish is a rich and dynamic language of speech and writing, which flourishes in various population centers around the world. It is our fervent hope that the present thematic issue will help to spark further interest in Haredi Yiddish and will pave the way for future research on its linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural aspects. For example, there is a need for more detailed exploration of attitudes to Yiddish among different sectors of Haredi society in various countries, including among ex-Haredim, as well as of Haredi Yiddish pedagogical practices and views on grammatical instruction. Similarly, further work on the linguistic characteristics of Hasidic vs. non-Hasidic Haredi Yiddish, and of different Hasidic groups, would be welcome additions to the scholarly literature. There is huge potential for diverse avenues of research on this vibrant global language as it continues to develop over the course of the 21st century.

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