

Lectures of Interest to Jewish Groups

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Dr. Benor has been giving interactive, engaging lectures to synagogues and other Jewish groups for over a decade. The lectures below can be offered individually or in sequences of three or more as part of a scholar-in-residence weekend. All talks draw from Dr. Benor’s academic research but are presented in ways that are accessible and interesting to the general public.

American Jewish Identity and Engagement:

Trends in American Jewish Identity and Community

How do Jews understand their Jewishness? How are they engaging with Jewish institutions and participating in Jewish life? What might the organized Jewish community do to increase Jewish engagement? This talk answers these questions by examining recent research on American Jews through various theoretical lenses on identity and community.

Jewish Engagement Among 20- and 30-Something Jews

Have young Jews abandoned traditional forms of Jewish engagement? How might their current practices affect the future of American Judaism and Jewish institutions? This talk presents an optimistic view, offering quantitative and qualitative evidence that many young Jews are engaged in Jewish life – in both old and new forms.

Language as a Marker of Jewish Engagement

This talk describes the range of Jewish American English – from the addition of a few Yiddish words among Jews with weak connections to organized Jewish life to the “Yeshivish” of strictly Orthodox Jews, which is filled with words from Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic and Yiddish influences in grammar and pronunciation. Jews of various stripes use subtle variation in language to signal their textual knowledge, religious denomination, generation from immigration, ancestral origin, and orientation toward Israel. In short, “Jewish language” serves not only to distinguish Jews from non-Jews but also to distinguish Jews from Jews.

Jewish Language:

Jewish Languages Around the World

An interactive lecture about how Jews have distinguished themselves linguistically from their non-Jewish neighbors throughout the history of the Diaspora. As Jews migrated around the world, they picked up local non-Jewish languages and made them distinctly Jewish by incorporating elements from Hebrew, Aramaic, and other languages. Through samples of Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and Judeo-Italian, this talk shows how Jews have used language as a prime means for expressing their identities as both Jews and local residents.

Do American Jews Speak a Jewish Language?

This talk looks at several features common among Jewish languages of the past and discusses whether American Jews use them. From the tradition of translating biblical and rabbinic texts to the incorporation of Hebrew words, most of these features are common among religiously engaged American Jews. A major exception is the use of Hebrew letters to write the vernacular. Through analysis of language, we can gain a better understanding of contemporary American Jews and how they compare to Jewish communities of the past.

Di Goyim, Loz Vedres, and The Gentiles: How Jews Refer to Non-Jews in Yiddish, Ladino, and English

Throughout history, Jews have referred to the non-Jews around them in various ways, simultaneously aligning themselves with and distinguishing themselves from non-Jews. They have used Hebrew words (such as *arel* – un-circumcised one), humorous concepts (such as *kratsmach* – used in Jewish English for ‘Christmas’ – from Yiddish ‘scratch me’), and derogatory language (such as *la zona* – Ladino ‘the prostitute’ for Mary). By looking at two Jewish languages that thrived in the recent past, as well as the Jewish English spoken in our communities today, this talk shows how the words we use both reflect and construct our identity as Jews in a non-Jewish world.

Orthodox Judaism:

Language and Ideology Among Strictly Orthodox Jews

This talk discusses several ideologies common among strictly Orthodox Jews and explains how each of these ideologies has an impact on language use. For example, the belief in God as a force in daily life affects the widespread use of phrases like *baruch hashem* (‘thank God’) and *mertsishem* (‘God willing’). The high value placed on textual learning has an impact on the use of chanting intonation contours and the pronunciation of English /t/ (e.g., righT vs. righ’). And the connection to the State of Israel affects the use of the Israeli Hebrew hesitation “click.” These linguistic features are discussed in the context of other aspects of culture, including clothing, food, music, and home decoration.

Becoming *Frum*: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism

This talk shows how there is more to becoming Orthodox than observing religious laws. Newly Orthodox Jews, or *ba’alei teshuva* (lit. ‘those who return’), encounter a very different culture, including new ways of talking, dressing, and acting. Focusing on the Yiddish- and Hebrew-influenced English speech of Orthodox Jews, this lecture explores how “BTs” integrate into the community partly by taking on these new practices.

Yiddish:

Chutzpah to Chidush: Yiddish-Influenced English 1920 to the Present

(Dr. Benor's most frequently requested talk)

In this talk, Dr. Benor shows how Yiddish has influenced the English of Jews (and non-Jews) in the U.S. In addition to words like “shlep,” “klutz,” and “maven,” Yiddish also affects English grammar and phrases like “be well” and “enough already.” Yiddish has a big impact both on the “Yinglish” of the Ashkenazic immigrant generation and on the “Yeshivish” English spoken by Orthodox Jews today. An analysis of songs by Mickey Katz and contemporary Orthodox bands demonstrates how Yiddish has had similar but different influences in various spheres of American Jewish life.

Redt yidish az di tate-mame zoln nisht farshteyn: Speak Yiddish so your parents won't understand!

This one-time class, geared toward pre-teens and teens, gives a glimpse into the exciting language and culture of Ashkenazic Jews. You know more Yiddish than you think! Yiddish words like “klutz,” “pastrami,” and “shmooze” have made their way into general American English. But Yiddish has also influenced our use of Hebrew words for specifically Jewish things, like “tallis,” “kiddush,” and “bar mitzvah.” And many Jewish family names are made from Yiddish words, such as “Goldman,” “Steinberg,” “Katz,” and “Abramson.” After this session – filled with games, songs, and discussion – you will be able to speak a bit of the language that your great-grandparents may have spoken so their kids wouldn't understand.

Hemshekh fun dor tsu dor: Bringing Yiddish to Young People

Yiddish educational programming ideas for all ages, including an introductory Yiddish lesson, songs, films, simple Yiddish skits, and more elaborate translations of American classics into Yiddish (My Fair Lady, Wizard of Oz, etc.).