

Video Clip: Jewish Neo Aramaic

A Living Jewish Language

<https://youtu.be/vjiMkZ0nk-Y>

Jewish Neo-Aramaic is spoken by Jews from the Kurdish region of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. The language is related to the ancient Aramaic language of the Talmud, some prayers, and parts of the Bible, but it differs due to historical developments and influences from local languages like Persian, Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish. Jewish dialects are often more similar to each other than to local Christian Aramaic dialects. Today, Jewish Neo-Aramaic is endangered, as most speakers moved to Israel, the US, and other regions and did not pass their mother tongue along to their children.

Suggested Implementation

History

1. Jews of the Middle East

Tanakh/Prayers

1. Prayers in languages other than Hebrew

Culture

1. Music, language, and culture of Middle Eastern Jews

Hebrew Language

1. Aramaic is the closest living relative to Hebrew
2. Jewish Neo-Aramaic has many words from Hebrew

Background

Throughout history, Jews have been a part of - and apart from - the surrounding society. This is reflected in their languages, from Judeo-Italian to Judeo-Arabic: similar to the surrounding language but with distinctive Jewish features. We see these trends in the Kurdish region, where Jewish Neo-Aramaic was spoken.

After the Jews were taken into the Babylonian Captivity, many of the new writings were in Aramaic instead of Hebrew. This includes much of the books of Daniel and Ezra, along with famous prayers such as the Qaddish, which were included in the prayer liturgy. The Assyrian alphabet, which we now know as the Hebrew alphabet, was also adopted at this time.

Hundreds of years after the destruction of the Temple, Jews continued speaking and writing in Aramaic, leading to the *Talmud* in Babylonia/Persia, the *Zohar* in Spain, and even songs like *Had Gadya* in Germany.

But Aramaic wasn't just a written language. From Zakho in the West to Sanandaj and Bijar in the East, Jewish communities developed the language for thousands of years,

speaking it alongside more dominant languages as they rose and fell. By the mid-20th century, most Aramaic-speaking Jews had fled upheavals and moved to Israel, Tehran, and the United States. There is even a tiny community of Aramaic-speaking Jews in Kazakhstan, who fled Iran in the last century and call themselves the Lakhlokh Jews.

The Jewish dialects of Aramaic, like other Jewish Languages, include many loanwords from Hebrew. But while many Jews learn Aramaic in order to study the Talmud, they wouldn't quite understand the Jewish Neo-Aramaic languages that have developed over the last 1500 years. Shifts in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary have changed Jewish Neo-Aramaic. For example, the dialects from Sanandaj and Urmia in Iran include many words from Persian, Sorani Kurdish, Arabic, Hebrew, and Turkish, and even some of their grammar has been affected by those languages.

Jewish Neo-Aramaic is so different from Assyrian Christian Aramaic dialects that communities in the same towns would often not understand each other. Jews have many names for their Aramaic languages, including Lishana Noshan or Lishan Didan, meaning "Our Language" – and "Hozaya" or "Hulaulá," meaning Jewish.

Today, though there are hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Kurdish region, Jewish Neo-Aramaic is being replaced by Hebrew and English. While Jewish Neo-Aramaic is critically endangered, there are small revival efforts, especially in Israel. There are still living speakers of these important languages of the Middle East, so when we discuss Jewish languages, we should remember to include the original language of the Jewish Diaspora: Aramaic.

Questions for Discussion

1. What Hebrew words do the following examples from Hulaulá sound like they are related to (answers in Hebrew script)?
'asarta – Shavuot (עצרת)
b'shma 'elha - In the name of God (בשם אלוה)
knishta – Synagogue (כנסת)
qaraula - Rabbinical School (לקרא/קורא)
olam – world (עולם)
2. Watch the video and then compare the written Hebrew and Jewish Neo-Aramaic versions of this Erev Shabbat song, Shalom Aleichem:
<https://opensiddur.org/prayers/solilunar/shabbat/seudat-leil-shabbat/shalom-aleikhem-shlama-elokhun-aramaic-translation-by-yaacov-maoz/>
3. What is lost when a language disappears? Do the languages we speak help us connect to any other aspects of culture? Why might speakers of Jewish Neo-Aramaic want to teach their children these languages in addition to Hebrew or English?
4. If you and your family relocated to another country where nobody but you spoke English, would you want to pass it on to the next generation? Why or why not?

5. What are some other examples of Jewish languages? What makes something a Jewish language? Could English peppered with Hebrew phrases be called Jewish English, or does it have to be more different than that?

Suggested Materials

Jewish Language Website:

<https://jewishlanguage.org/>

Jewish Languages Jewish Aramaic page:

<https://www.jewishlanguages.org/jewish-aramaic>

Young Jews learning ancestral languages from their grandparents:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojeYAfM8mYI>

Videos of people speaking Jewish Neo-Aramaic:

<https://www.elalliance.org/languages/neo-aramaic>

The North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic Database Project:

<https://nena.ames.cam.ac.uk/>

OmniGlot page about Jewish Neo-Aramaic:

<https://omniglot.com/writing/jewishneoaramaic.htm>

Videos of people speaking Jewish Neo-Aramaic:

<https://www.lashon.org/1/taxonomy/term/138>

Videos of people speaking Jewish Languages of Iran (including Jewish Neo-Aramaic):

<https://www.7dorim.com/gooyesh-ha/>

A song in Jewish Neo-Aramaic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-qXGDJY4Kc>

An article that touches on the Jews of Kurdistan and has a brief soundbyte:

<https://zamancollective.com/post/183008678613/mizrahi-dialects-and-the-persistence-of-collective>

A Jewish Neo-Aramaic midrash on the story of the binding of Isaac (4 videos):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxb2nRi09SE&list=UUL0r7DnFwm44VimtlwuNAwQ>

Yerushalayim Shel Zahav in Jewish Neo-Aramaic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXHuru16kqk>

Ekhad Mi Yodea in Jewish Neo-Aramaic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4biGsEPNuEg>

Had Gadya in Jewish Neo-Aramaic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hj4LxOyTR8>

A Little Red Riding Hood short film in Jewish Neo-Aramaic: <https://youtu.be/x6mN3N14Sc0>

Video Clip: Judeo-Median Languages
The Lesser Known Jewish Languages of Iran
<https://youtu.be/nhKVtlrAdkM>

Jews in Iran historically spoke many languages - from Persian, Semitic, and Median language families. The languages of Jews in different cities and towns were so different that their speakers often could not understand each other. Now these longstanding Jewish languages are endangered, as most Jews shifted to standard Persian in Iran or to Modern Hebrew, English, and other languages after emigrating. How did these languages develop? How do they differ from their surrounding Jewish and non-Jewish languages? And what is being done to save these endangered languages before it's too late?

Suggested Implementation

History

1. Jews of the Middle East
2. What has historically given Jews their identities, separate from and similar to their surrounding cultures?
3. Languages becoming endangered
4. Efforts and reasons to pass on traditions to future generations

Culture

1. Music, language, and culture of Middle Eastern Jews

Background

While most Iranian Jews speak Jewish dialects of the Persian Language, many in the older generations spoke a whole different set of Jewish languages. But they weren't speaking Yiddish or Ladino, or Hebrew or Aramaic—they were speaking what linguists call Judeo-Median.

These languages, which mix Hebrew words with the ancient Median language, are often difficult for Persian speakers to understand. Jewish communities in the cities of the Central Plateau have kept these special languages alive for thousands of years.

In the centuries after Cyrus the Great of the Persian Empire conquered the Median Empire in 550 BCE, Aramaic, Persian and Median were all spoken in the region. Jews, who at one point made up over 20% of the population of Persia, helped found important cities like Esfahan, and populated nearly every town and village in what is now Iran.

As other Empires and languages came and went, Jews kept their languages and traditions alive in the *mahallehs*, Jewish neighborhoods. From Yazd and Kerman to Borujerd and Hamedan, these Judeo-Median languages stayed alive as languages only the Jews could understand. Every city may have once had a Jewish dialect that disappeared over the years, spoken by many of the famous historical Jewish figures of Iran, and some elders today still speak these languages.

The southwestern language, Judeo-Shirazi, has preserved conservative forms that somewhat resemble the language of famous medieval poets like Hafez, but Judeo-Median languages have roots in a branch that diverged hundreds of years earlier. Judeo-Median grammar more-closely resembles other northwestern Iranian languages like Balochi, Gilaki, and Kurdish, than it does the Southwestern Persian language also spoken by nearly all Iranian Jews.

In the last decade, researchers have started trying to collect more data in these languages to better understand, record, and revive them. Languages are some of the most detailed data available to help understand a culture, its characters, and the events of its past, and each dialect potentially holds clues to the hidden stories of nearly three thousand years of Iranian Jews.

The drive to document these languages is a huge opportunity to save our communities and history from oblivion.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the existence of separate Jewish languages (like Yiddish, Ladino, Aramaic, and Judeo-Median) say about Jewish communities living in those places? Could Jewish languages serve as a way to be secretive? To hold on to an identity? And what does it say about those communities that they even developed these languages, instead of holding on to the original Hebrew language of their ancestors?
2. What are some other examples of Jewish languages? What makes something a Jewish language? Could English peppered with Hebrew phrases be called Jewish English, or does it have to be more different than that?
3. What is lost when a language disappears? Do the languages we speak help us connect to any other aspects of culture? Why might speakers of Judeo-Median Languages want to teach their children these languages in addition to Persian, Hebrew, or English?
4. Look at the words Persian-origin Jews use when speaking English:
<https://jel.jewish-languages.org/words?use=1000>
 - a. What languages are these words from? (Persian and Arabic because Persian includes many Arabic words). Why are there no words from Judeo-Median languages like Judeo-Hamedani and Judeo-Isfahani? Because Jews in Iran had shifted from those languages to standard Persian in the 20th century because of Iranian educational policies that required instruction in standard Persian. When Iranian Jews immigrated to the United States and England and picked up English, they maintained some Persian words but few or no words from the historical Judeo-Median languages.
5. What makes languages such an important part of heritage?
6. If you knew that there was one speaker left of a language, and you wanted to help them record and preserve that language, how would you go about doing that?

Suggested Readings/Materials

Jewish Language Website:

<https://www.jewishlanguages.org/>

Borjian, Habib. "What is Judeo-Median and how does it differ from Judeo-Persian?". The Journal of Jewish Languages, 2014:

https://www.jewishlanguages.org/files/ugd/288ea6_b8db0d66cdfe4cf1a494ac5e0a8a3172.pdf

Young Jews learning ancestral languages from their grandparents:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojeYAfM8mYI>

Jewish Languages Judeo-Iranian page:

<https://www.jewishlanguages.org/judeo-iranian>

Videos of people speaking Judeo-Median languages:

<https://www.elalliance.org/projects/jewish-languages>

Videos of people speaking Judeo-Median languages:

<https://www.lashon.org/1/taxonomy/term/138>

Videos of people speaking Judeo-Median languages:

<https://www.7dorim.com/gooyesh-ha/>