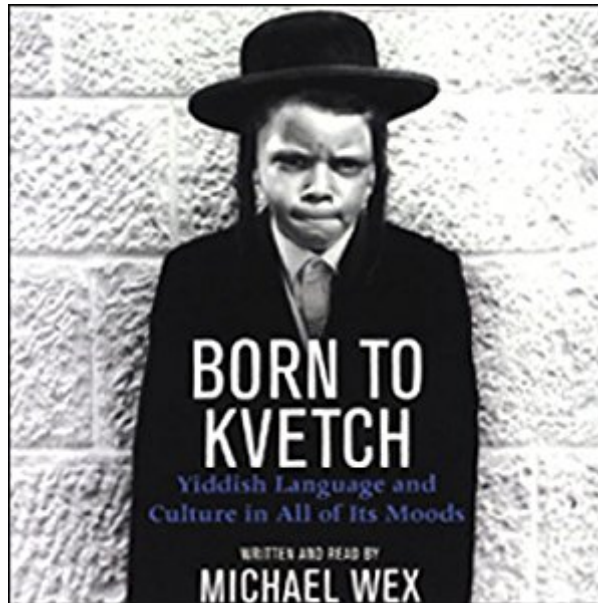




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# Born To Kvetch: Yiddish Language And Culture In All Of Its Moods



## Synopsis

A delightful excursion through the Yiddish language, the culture it defines and serves, and the fine art of complaint Throughout history, Jews around the world have had plenty of reasons to lament. And for a thousand years, they've had the perfect language for it. Rich in color, expressiveness, and complexity, Yiddish has proven incredibly useful and durable. Its wonderful phrases and idioms impeccably reflect the mind-set that has enabled the Jews of Europe to survive a millennium of unrelenting persecution . . . and enables them to kvetch about it! Michael Wex—professor, scholar, translator, novelist, and performer—takes a serious yet unceasingly fun and funny look at this remarkable kvetch-full tongue that has both shaped and has been shaped by those who speak it. Featuring chapters on curse words, food, sex, and even death, he allows his lively wit and scholarship to roam freely from Sholem Aleichem to Chaucer to Elvis. Perhaps only a khokhem be-layle (a fool, literally a "sage at night," when there's no one around to see) would care to pass up this endearing and enriching treasure trove of linguistics, sociology, history, and folklore—an intriguing appreciation of a unique and enduring language and an equally fascinating culture. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an extremely interesting book focusing on deep cultural aspects of Central European Jewish culture that are reflected in the structure and idioms of Yiddish. It is organized in chapters corresponding to various aspects and stages of Jewish life (birth, marriage, money, sex, death

etc.) Examples of sayings and expressions are given in (transcribed) Yiddish, translated into English and thoroughly discussed. It is accessible to a reader not knowing Yiddish but it should be interesting to fluent speakers as well, because of the links between culture and language. A real treat for anybody interested in the relations between the two. Beautifully written with a lot of often sarcastic humor.

English books on Yiddish generally fall into two categories: the oh isn't it a cute colorful language angle; the scholarly tome that sucks the life out of the language. Mr. Wex has done Yiddish a great service and has written a book that avoids both of these pitfalls. Beneath the humor - and this is a very funny, well written book - is a very serious examination of Yiddish as a language inextricably tied to its religion. Very few people could have written a book as insightful as this one and still made it entertaining. Mr. Wex has the background - a Yeshiva bocher turned secularist - and mindset to carry it off with aplomb. Some people might complain that the examination of Yiddish language and culture in this book is too harsh and well... kvetchadik. But there is pride for a language and culture long gone throughout this book. More than any book on Yiddish that I've read, this one rings true. The description of the culture of Chasidic education of children is particularly unflinching and mordantly accurate. Footnotes would help this book a great deal. But this is a fine achievement. Now if only they wouldn't have put someone else's photo next to the NY Times review. ;)

I was first attracted to this book by a review that mentioned Wex's comments on a Jewish prayer that is used to thank after going to the bathroom! I had no idea there was such a thing. Why should I, a Christian/Buddhist nun? But I have always been attracted to Judaism, particularly its ethical stance, and I love the Yiddish language. So I bought it. I learned right away that this book is no funny book of Yiddish phrases. It's a seriocomic description of the origins of Yiddish and how it has always mirrored the Jewish cultural and religious identity. The bathroom prayer, for example: it acknowledges G-d the almighty and gives thanks for all of the "orifices" that G-d gave the human body, the necessity of having them, and gratitude that this time they worked fine. Wex pursues this until he comes to the conclusion that even a prayer for a successful "pee" recapitulates creation itself, and serves to strengthen Jewish identity. I did wonder if this was a thing of the past, and then one day I was schmoozing with my Jewish rheumatologist and asked him if he knew of the prayer. Without batting an eye, he said that he used it every time he went to the "little room." If you think that's all there is, wait till you get to the chapter about swinging live chickens with diapers over your head!

Although nominally a book about Yiddish, *Born to Kvetch* is so much more. Each chapter focuses on a specific cultural theme (Curses, Kosher food, Life Cycle, etc.), and then uses Yiddish vocabulary, sayings, uses to explore how the language reflected the lives of Eastern European Jews. This is much more in depth than Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish*. Rather than a catalog of sayings, *Born to Kvetch* is more an academic exploration of the Venn between Language, Culture and History. Michael Wex explores his subject in much more detail than the Yiddish saying type books that are more common. Although the subject matter is engrossing, the book can be dry at times, which can sometimes be a bit of the slog. The pay-off is a greater understanding and appreciation for the depth of Yiddish

This is an interesting and well written book. The focus of the book is on the "background" of Yiddish. Mr. Wex's intent appears to be to provide the reader with an understanding of the culture that provides the meaning to the words and the motivation for expressing them. There is humour in this book but it is not a book written with the sole intent to share that humour. It is a book about why Yiddish says what it does. Wex does a good job of demonstrating why the Yiddish language, to be appreciated in its entirety, must be perceived to have evolved in a culture that is fatalistic and appreciative of irony. If the intent of the person buying this book is to develop an appreciation of Yiddish humour, this is an excellent book to read. If the intent is to purchase a book of Yiddish jokes, this is not the book to buy.

I purchased the book about a month ago and I must say that besides being a real good read this is one of those books that a serious reader will keep coming back to over a long period of time. I speak some Yiddish but I never could think of ever possessing a book of this wonderful format. I mean I read Yiddish alright but I never really knew that there's a very special spirit behind it! I do recommend the book to anyone who's genuinely interested in real Ashkenazi Jewish culture. I'm also looking forward to receiving the Author's "Just Say Nu" book! Being Ukrainian I do use the "nu" almost every day myself :) By the way "Born To Kvetch" will make many readers with Slavic background smile quite a few times since Yiddish does make wonderful use of Slavic vocabulary, much of it common for Ukrainian and Polish. With great thanks and best wishes to Michael Wex from Kiev, Taras

what a great book!

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