Longings and Belongings: Yiddish Identity and Consumer Culture

Marilyn Halter

Since the 1970s, an ethnic revival has been in motion in the United States, propelling American-born descendants of immigrants to actively reidentify with their respective ethnic heritages. The so-called "roots" phenomenon accounts for such developments as the growth of ethnic celebrations, a zeal for genealogy, increased travel to ancestral homelands, and greater interest in ethnic artifacts, cuisine, music, literature, and, of course, language. This vibrant cultural florescence has evolved, however, within the context of modern consumer capitalism. The following essay seeks to explore the broader questions of the relationship of ethnic identity formation to consumerism through an examination of the dynamics of Yiddish culture in late twentieth-century American life.

Historically, the relationship between human beings and material objects changed significantly with the development of modernity. Whereas in the pre-modern period identities were acquired with the possessions one inherited, in modern times people most often construct their identities through purchase. This has come to include one's ethnic identification as well. Through the consumption of ethnic goods and services, descendants of immigrants modify and signal ethnic identities in social settings no longer organized around ethnic group boundaries. Earlier generations of ethnic Americans had typically defined themselves through compatriot community affiliations. By the late twentieth century in America, the fluidity inherent in such an individualistic society still holding within it large numbers of diverse religious, racial, and nationality
groups has led to a tendency to reflect and create the ethnic components of one's identity through a process of acquisition. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition in this culture would be impossible.

Much has changed in the years since Margaret Mead pronounced in a 1970 essay that "being American is a matter of abstention from foreign ways, foreign food, foreign ideas, foreign accents." Although cultivating a foreign accent may not yet be a sign of true Americanness, relearning one's ancestral tongue, eating ethnic cuisine, displaying ethnic artifacts, fostering a hyphenated identity, even reverse name-changes (back to the old-country original) have become the American way. What some viewed as a passing fad of the 1970s has only intensified as the century draws to a close.

This trend also runs directly counter to much of the general sociological literature that had predicted that the significance of ethnicity would steadily decline with the advance of modernity. Not only has ethnic identification persisted, but recent research demonstrates a correlation between higher socioeconomic status and increased educational levels with stronger rather than weakened expressions of ethnicity. Movement up the social ladder is no longer automatically assumed to be an assimilating force. The ethnic renaissance is a form of voluntary ethnicity that has made any contradictions between being American and asserting a foreign heritage disappear.

Those seeking to reclaim a Yiddish identity are no exception to this pattern. Particularly in the last fifteen years, American Jews have enthusiastically pursued the recovery of the language, literature, and culture of their Yiddish ancestors. The explosion of Yiddishkeit goes well beyond increased enrollments in Yiddish language classes. It encapsulates the resurgence of interest in Yiddish literature buoyed by the energetic recovery, restoration, and distribution of Yiddish books and vintage films as well as a booming revival of Klezmer music and the Yiddish theater. Yiddish clubs, summer institutes, and curricula within Jewish Studies programs are proliferating as well.

What, then, is the relationship of this burgeoning Yiddishkeit to the commercial marketplace? Merely posing this question runs the risk of immediately alienating some readers. Despite the voluminous attention in both popular and scholarly literatures to the permutations of American identity in the twentieth century, in general commentators have shied away from exploring the underlying economic issues involved. The sensibilities surrounding the romance of ethnicity the nostalgia—do not readily invite an analysis that might be equated with what are often viewed as the crasser elements of such behavior. Yet, in modern societies the one feeds the other, and, whether we like it or not, we are all deeply immersed in a commodity-driven consumer culture that daily shapes who we are and how we define ourselves.

Research reveals, however, that much of the motivation to rejuvenate Yiddish culture stems from a growing disillusionment with consumer society. The movement is often strengthened by a sharp critique of commercialism in favor of a more spiritual quest to find meaning and a sense of place through building bridges to a Yiddish past. This is the paradox of the business of ethnicity: The impetus to reclaim roots frequently derives from a critique of commercial culture at the same time that consumers seek to resuscitate ethnic values in the context of the marketplace. Consumerism, in effect, serves to foster greater awareness of ethnicity.

Thus, the relationship of ethnic identity to commercial endeavors becomes much more complicated than a simple linear analysis of the inevitable commodification of culture inherent in a capitalist system. Certainly for many, the ethnic revival represents the search for recognizable or familiar points of reference in a cold and impersonal world. Moreover, they see direct links between the modern life of material plenty and the perception of spiritual poverty. Rather than casting consumerism as invariably dissipating tradition, community, and meaning, however, the argument here is that it can at the same time enhance such identifications. Thus, ethnic identities are continually being reinvented to fulfill our desires to feel anchored to a stable, harmonious, and localized past despite living amidst the vast and chaotic landscapes of consumption that characterize the present.

At one level, many find themselves celebrating and demonstrating their Yiddish identity through conscious choices concerning what they buy and sell—the simple purchase of a gift mug, an apron or T-shirt with Yiddish sayings or attendance at a gathering such as the extension of the Lower East Side Jewish Festival held in June of 1996 and billed as a "voyage of discovery and rediscovery of cultural roots," where the publicity flyer enticingly promises "Hundreds of Vendors" on the premises, and where those in attendance eagerly spend their dollars on Katz's knishes, Guss' pickles or Ratner's kosher ice cream while taking in a performance by Tovah Feldshuh or tapping their feet to the music of the West End Klezmerim Band.
The Yiddish revival has also inspired small business ventures such as the start-up company, called Lasting Refrain, that markets personalized chupahs ranging in price from $125 to $2000. The company can barely keep up with the demand for orders. Or the cleverly conceived “Mashuga Nuts” label. Inventive as it is, the name doesn’t quite carry over to their cookie line, so the manufacturers have included the annotation “Shortbread So Good It’ll Make You Crazy” under the imperfect “Mashuga Cookies” logo. Another find for the Yiddish enthusiast is Einstein’s toys, collectibles, and “museum with price tags” in downtown Philadelphia. The Jewish owners specialize in ethnic merchandise of all kinds including Russian stacking dolls and African-American toy soldiers as well as rare ethnic artifacts from popular culture such as playbills and posters. These latter items are displayed in ethnically-organized spaces in the second floor gallery—a room for original Russian paintings, a Yiddish room, a wall devoted to Irish collectibles, and so forth. But nothing quite tops the board game designed and produced by the proprietor himself called “Look at the Schmack on That Camel” with its accompanying cassette, “Goys to Mensch,” a take-off on the hugely popular black R & B group from Philadelphia, “Boys II Men.” Another item for which there is such great demand that they can’t keep enough on the shelf.

But the marketing of Yiddishkeit is not limited to the commercial sector alone. One of the leading non-profit organizations devoted to the preservation and revitalization of Yiddish culture is the National Yiddish Book Center based in western Massachusetts, where a new position of Director of Marketing has just been created to facilitate the shift from an operating budget supported by charitable contributions to one in which two-thirds of the funding results from earned income. As the Executive Director explained:

People no longer give for Tzedakah (obligations of charity) alone. They want something for their money—something that appeals to their ethnic identity. People crave products that express their identity. The Book Center is going to try to corner that market, to specialize in challenging intellectual products.

A wonderful new facility is scheduled to open in June of 1997 on the campus of Hampshire College that will include a book repository and processing center, exhibit galleries, an auditorium, outdoor amphitheater, a sound studio, conference meeting rooms, kosher kitchen, storytelling courtyard, and more. Although from 40,000 to 80,000 people are projected to visit in the first year alone, there will be no admission fee. Instead, the building’s entire ongoing operating budget is to be covered by the Visitors’ Center book store sales. The shop will be stocked with volumes in Yiddish and English, with posters, cassettes, CDs, and videos, but will also include “as many chachkas as they can think of . . . but tasteful.” 3 This is not an unrealistic goal. The recently opened Norman Rockwell museum located nearby has a similar-sized gift shop supporting its own operation.

Clearly, at a local level, in business and in the non-profit sector, consumption of Yiddishkeit is flourishing. But the phenomenon reaches beyond grass-roots initiatives and penny entrepreneurship to the world of celebrities, high fashion, and multinational corporations. Even the non-profit Yiddish Book Center has managed to capture the imagination and committed participation of such well-known Hollywood stars as Leonard Nimoy, Walter Matthau, Lauren Bacall, Rhea Perlman, and Paul Reiser, each of whom has demonstrated a thirst to find meaning through the rediscovery of his/her Yiddish roots. In the arena of haute couture, designer Jean-Paul Gaultier glamorized Hasidism when he introduced his 1993 fall collection and his models stepped onto the runway wearing his startling “Hasidic Chic” creations. The extremes of commodification form the basis of representation in a 1991 commentary on Jewish identity in a mixed media piece by artists Cary Leibowitz and Rhonda Lieberman, titled “Chanel Hanukkah.” 4 In this work, the menorah is depicted by nine bright tubes of lipstick sitting atop a glistening gold Chanel evening bag and accompanied by a gold chain necklace made of Hanukkah gelt. The “real” menorah in the picture (albeit stamped with a Chanel logo) is empty of candles but instead is used to hold bottles of Chanel perfume. 5 Hanukkah gelt just might be the perfect symbol for the marriage of culture and the marketplace.

Perhaps the best example of marketing Yiddish at the corporate level, however, is illustrated by the enormously successful advertising campaign launched in 1995 by AT&T to appeal to emerging ethnic communities in the United States, including not only print ads pitched to Hispanic and new Asian populations but to Irish, Italian, even British Americans. Their promotions aimed at the Jewish-American community include significant Yiddish content, such as their “With 50% Savings You Can Afford to Kvell All You Want” ad. Underneath a photo of grandparents kvelling at their grandson’s Bar Mitzvah is written, “You’re so proud you could just
burst. After all, such an occasion you don't celebrate every day. So go ahead and call the whole mishpocheh,” utilizing not only the Yiddish terms kvell and mishpocheh (both untranslated) but a Yiddish cadence and syntax. In a promotional brochure put out by the communications company that developed these campaigns for AT&T, kvell is defined for the reader in an accompanying note as to “beam with immense pride.” Mishpocheh is not explained, however.

Another AT&T ad, titled “More Gab, Less Gelt” and showing Hanukkah gelt spilling out of two open hands, was obviously, developed for the holiday season. Here we see gelt again, but this time, without irony. The accompanying text gives information about how to save money, but does not carry on with the gelt theme as does the kvell ad, presumably because it is a more universally understood representation that can stand on its own. However, the brochure does make sure to define gelt as a term for money and a traditional Hanukkah gift of chocolate coins.

Another in this series that, with the exception of the 800 number to call utilizes only text with Yiddish content, shows a frontal view of a large pig wearing a hat and dark glasses with the phrase “Something Here Just Isn’t Kosher” in bold above it. Underneath the pig is written, “Treyfe Is Treyfe, No Matter How It’s Disguised.” In the fine print, it carries on with the “disguising treyfe” motif by explaining:

Like the claims some other long distance companies have been making. That they are doing you a mitzva, telling you how much you can save with them. Or put charts in their ads comparing their prices to AT&T prices. Meanwhile they are comparing their discount rates to AT&T’s regular rates. Which is like comparing kugel to knishes. Bagels to bialys. It’s just not the same thing. So make sure you always read the fine print. And if another long distance company calls, before you give them the whole megillah, just tell them to put their claims in writing. Remember when something sounds too good to be true, it’s usually no metsieh.

In this case, none of the Yiddish references are defined, nor in the ad itself or in the promotional brochure. Plainly, shopping for a Yiddish identity has become big business for contemporary consumer society. At least within the Jewish sector and largely because of the need for kosher products, brand-name advertising such as the recent AT&T campaign does have historical precedents, dating back as far as the early part of the century when, in 1913, Proctor & Gamble proclaimed that “the Hebrew Race Had Been Waiting 4,000 Years” for the recently invented all-vegetable Crisco shortening. The company continued to promote its product by publishing a cookbook, “Crisco Recipes for the Jewish Housewife,” in Yiddish and English. In the mid-1930s, the head of Maxwell House Coffee, in an attempt to expand his consumer base, determined that coffee beans were classified as berries and thus could be declared kosher for Passover. He went on to popularize the brand by distributing Maxwell House Passover Hagadahs free to Jewish customers.7

The American kosher market is a rapidly expanding segment of today’s food industry with promotional campaigns that draw on sophisticated market research. In every year since 1990, approximately 1,200 new or newly certified items have entered the marketplace. For example, when the results of a survey conducted by Dannon concluded that Jews were particularly fond of yogurt, the company made an all-out effort to get its products upgraded from the “K” for kosher to the more stringent “OU” (Orthodox Union) certification, with impressive results. Dannon increased their sales by more than 25 percent among Jewish customers. Some manufacturers are further capitalizing on related trends among health-conscious consumers, targeting vegetarians to come up with scores of innovative varieties. Fleishmann’s exemplifies this approach in its “Dairy with a Difference” campaign that offers dizzying combinations of certified kosher health foods such as its “unsalted, kosher, lactose free, cholesterol free, parve margarine.” But it is not only kosher dairy that is thriving. In Boychicks in the Hood, Robert Eisenberg offers a fascinating portrait of a Lubavitcher family relocated from Crown Heights to the hinterlands of Postville, Iowa, to corner the kosher meat business:

In three short years, entrepreneur Aaron Rubashkin and two of his sons have tapped into the glittering motherlode of the glatt kosher market, an industry that is expanding almost exponentially as its traditional customer base continues its demographic explosion. . . .

The rebirth of interest in Yiddish culture has many sources, but one significant aspect of its appeal relates to the skyrocketing rates of intermarriage. Exploring one’s Yiddish heritage turns out to be far less threatening and less foreign to non-Jewish partners than the kind of
pressures that invariably arise when dealing with traditional interfaith relationships, particularly when religious conversion is contemplated. The stakes are simply less high: "You discover your roots, I'll discover mine, and the kids can explore both." Acceptance and participation on the part of a non-Jewish mate can be as facile as attending a Klezmer concert or enjoying a dinner of blintzes and herring. This is part of the utilitarian nature of what some have labeled optional ethnicity, but which can also be termed convenience ethnicity. Whether an Ashkenazic Jew or not, one can approach Yiddishkeit from an intellectual curiosity and level of social involvement that does not necessarily require having to renegotiate fundamental questions of faith and spirituality.

The increasingly multi-ethnic make-up of the American population has not escaped the attention of the business world. As the owner of Einstein's put it:

I have discovered that intermarried couples exhibit a compassion, interest and are looking to be educated about one's mate (at least during the inception of the euphoric relationship). Newly intermarrieds are a prime target for cross-cultural and ethnic marketing.

More and more instances of what can be called "blended ethnicity," the amalgamation of two or more ethnic backgrounds, are showing up in the marketplace. There's Ginsberg's Pub located on a busy corner near San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf and featuring Irish-Yiddish Coffee, or Manishewitz's Kosher for Passover Pizza flagged by both a seder plate and a Chef Boyardee-like figure on the eye-catching box design. With inventions on the market such as El Rancho's Jalapeno Rugelach, that bills itself as "The Ultimate Jewish-Mexican Dessert," there can be no doubt that multiculture sells.

Another striking example of blended ethnicity is illustrated by one of the workshop offerings at the recent Mame-Loosh '96 tettef in Connecticut, sponsored by the Workman's Circle/Arbiter Ring. Titled "Tsi Kenst Shiatsus?" it promised "a hands-on workshop, with instruction in Yiddish by our certified masseur...in the tactile arts of Swedish massage, shiatsu, trigger point, and reflexology" with instructions to "bring your own oils. (Towels too.)" Although many of the retreat workshops were offered in both English and Yiddish, this Judeo-Japanese-Swedish experience was available in Yiddish only.

It is not only the twin factors of the soaring intermarriage and low fertility rates characteristic of Jewish demographics at century's end that challenge the vitality of the community, but analysis of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey confirms that American Jews also demonstrate particularly high levels of geographic mobility. The findings of Sidney and Alice Goldstein's aptly titled volume, Jews on the Move, indicate that so much residential dispersion further weakens Jewish community and organizational life. However, the loosening of localized ties and the loss of a sense of place is often offset by reinvented forms of portable ethnicity. Retreats and workshops like Mame-Loosh '96 allow for a temporary sense of Yiddish community that fulfills such longings in an intensive, short-term way. Commercial expressions of ethnic Jewishness—whether furnishings, books, foods, or decorative objects—replace institutional and neighborhood affiliations. Mail-order businesses such as The Source for Everything Jewish especially thrive among such highly mobile populations.

Such convenience ethnicity has also manifested itself in recent years through the evolution of Yiddish in cyberspace. The emergence of high-tech global communications makes it possible for those who remain geographically scattered to no longer be isolated from one another. For the first time in history, ethnic communities are able to stay in daily contact without physical proximity. With the founding in 1993 of the on-line Yiddish Network, followers of Yiddishkeit worldwide are becoming electronically integrated—a global smoozeleh without ever having to leave the comfort of home and with minimal logistical demands or personal sacrifice. This is a user-friendly Yiddishkeit that is escalating rapidly. At the first face-to-face TYN—The Yiddish Network—conference held at the University of Maryland, there were 128 delegates. Four years later, in 1996, the number had jumped to 347, and the organization boasted of contacts in all 50 states and in 25 countries. At the Mame-Loosh '96 conference, those deciding against massage had the choice of signing up for two different internet workshops that would introduce you either to "Mendele On Line" or to the "Virtual Shetel" web pages.

Controversy about the efficacy of ethnic identities that are voluntary or optional also informs this discussion. Even those who recognize that ethnicity still matters are likely to assert that it has been steadily eroding into a purely symbolic form, a kind of token ethnicity, that lacks substance and real meaning. The data gathered for this research challenge this position to show instead that, despite commercialization and maybe even
because of it, much of this behavior can still uphold authentic, if
ambiguous, ethnic identities. Certainly, a major requirement of
convenience ethnicity is a sense of feeling secure enough in this culture to
be able to accentuate differences and to distinguish oneself from mass
society. As Ruth Weiss, Professor of Yiddish Literature at Harvard,
succinctly stated it:

The more comfortable Jews feel in America, the more open they
are to reclaiming a culture of exile. This is the paradox of the
American diaspora: the wish to feel different and at home.
Yiddish, with all its complex, contradictory associations, is the
language of that desire.14

Events such as Yiddish festivals with rows of vendors, artistic
creations appealing to the aesthetics of Yiddish homemakers, fund-raising
projects to sponsor Yiddish educational programs, all benefit from a
highly-evolved consumer society even though, oftentimes, the motivation
to initiate such endeavors is in reaction to an overly consumer-oriented
culture. The marketplace becomes a point of entry particularly for people
from secular families. The values, interests, and activities of the new
consumption classes in relation to this more situational ethnicity
simultaneously gratify both spiritual and instrumental aims. As the
President of the National Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (what used
to be called Hillel) explained:

If there is any culture that this generation is familiar with, it’s the
consumer culture... They know how to shop. Their cultural
place is not the town square, it’s the mall—with all of both the
superficiality and the abundance that that creates and it is here they
are looking to be consumers of a life that makes sense.15

Notes

1 This paper is derived from one of the case studies included in my
forthcoming book on consumer culture and ethnic identity entitled The Business
of Ethnicity, Schocken Books.

2 Margaret Mead, “Ethnicity and Anthropology in America,” in George

DeVos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, eds. Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and

3 On the positive correlation of strong ethnic identifications with upward
mobility, see Richard Alba, Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White
America (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Tom W. Smith “Ethnic
Measurement and Identification.” Ethnicity 7 (1980), 78-95; and Stanley
Lieberson, “Unhyphenated Whites in the United States,” Ethnic and Racial
Studies 8, no. 1 (1985): 159-80. On the voluntary and symbolic nature of
ethnicity, see especially Herbert Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of
Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 2, no. 1

4 Interview with Eric Vieland, July 2, 1996.

5 Aaron Lansky, July 9, 1996.

6 Both the Gaultier image and the Chanel Hanukkah piece were part of
the New York Jewish Museum’s 1996 “Too Jewish?” exhibition and are reprinted
in the accompanying volume, Norman Kleblatt, ed. Too Jewish?: Challenging
Traditional Identities (The Jewish Museum, New York and Rutgers University
Press, 1996), xvii and 141.

7 Joan Nathan, Jewish Cooking In America (New York: Alfred A.
Knopf, 1994), 21-22 and 256; Jenna Weissman Joselit, The Wonders of America:


9 Robert Eisenberg, Boychicks in the Hood: Travels in the Hasidic

10 See, for example, Mary Waters, Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities

11 Interview with Wilbur Pierce, October 9, 1996.

12 Sidney Goldstein and Alice Goldstein, Jews on the Move: Implications

13 Forward (24 May 1996), 6.5

14 Quoted in Jonathan Rosen, “A dead language, Yiddish lives—And so
does the fight over why,” Times Magazine (7 July 1996), 26-27.

15 Interview with Richard Joel, December 12, 1995.