Common Yiddish Words and Expressions

Yiddish is known as being its own rich linguistic culture. It is a loose combination of Hebrew, Polish, and German. Although many consider Yiddish to be a dying culture and language, Yiddish has many unique words and phrases that are still commonly used to give humor, sarcasm, and joy in the moment as needed. English speakers may not even realize how many of our often-used expressions come from the Yiddish language. In researching the language of both Sophia’s and Maya’s cultures for *Save the Last Dance*, I have compiled a list of some of the more commonly used Yiddish words or expressions (spelling/phonetics used to express the English words may vary based on accent, region, and specific pronunciation from the original Yiddish). It is a language that still beats loudly in our common vernacular and keeps some communities glued together in expression and communication.

BALABUSTA: the wife of an important person, or a bossy woman, a good homemaker

BISSEL, BISSELA: a little bit

BUBBE: a grandmother (“bubbeleh” is often used as a term of endearment)

BUPKES: trivial, worthless

BUBBE-MYSEH: old wives’ tales, nonsense

BROCHE (Brukhe): a prayer

CHUTZPAH: nerve, extreme arrogance (in Yiddish, this is not a compliment although in English it can be used to describe a confident or courageous person)

FARPITZS: all dressed up

FEH: conveying disapproval, displeasure, or disgust

FERDRAYT: dizzy, confused

FERSHTAY: understand

FERTUMMELT: befuddled, confused

FERCLEMPT: exhausted. (also, FERMISHT)

GAVALT: a cry of fear or a cry for help - “Oy, Gevalt” is often used as expression meaning “oh how terrible”

GLITCH: literally, a slip or a nosedive (minor problem or error)

GONIF: a thief, a tricky clever person, a shady character

GOY: a non-Jewish male, a Gentile (“shikse” is used to describe a non-Jewish female)

GUT SHABBOS: greeting for the Sabbath – “Good Sabbath”

HAYMISH: cozy, home, friendly, informal - a haimisher mensch is someone you feel comfortable with

HOK A CHAINIK: to talk too much, to talk nonsense

KETZELEH: gentle term of endearment, like “kitten” or “cutie-pie”

KIBBITZ: to talk lightly, tease, or joke around. A kibitzer often gives useless or unasked-for advice.

KISHKA: intestines, belly (i.e., to hit someone in the “kishka” means to hit him in the stomach or guts.

KLUTZ: an awkward, uncoordinated person

KNIPELEH: a bit of money, hidden and saved for an emergency

KOSHER: refers to food that it prepared according to Jewish law – can also be used to mean “legitimate”

KVETCH: complain, whine, or fret

LOCH IN KOP: literally, a hole in the head, refers to things one definitely does not need

LUZZEM: leave him be, let her or him alone

MAIDEL: a girl or woman

MAZEL TOV: good luck, usually said as a statement of support or congratulations

MENTSH: an honorable, decent person, a person who helps when needed

MISHEGAS: insanity or craziness (a crazy person is “meshugah” or a “meshuganer”)

MISHPOCHEH: family

NACHAS: good fortune, something that brings pride to someone

NARRISHKEIT: foolishness, trivia

NAR: a fool

NEBBISH: an inadequate person, a “loser”

NOSH: eat, munch on, nibble a light snack

NU: “So?” or “Huh?”

ONGEPOTCHKET: messed up, slapped together without form, excessively and unaesthetically decorated

OY-YOY-YOY: An exclamation of sorrow and lamentation (sometimes followed by “Gevalt” or “Vey”)

PATSHGE IN TUCHES: a spank on the backside

PISHER (PISHEKE): a young, inexperienced person, a person of no consequence.

PLOTZ: to explode or collapse

PUTZ: a vulgarism for penis but most usually used as term of contempt for a fool, or an easy mark.

RACHMONES: compassion

SAYKHEL: common sense

SHAYNER: pretty, wholesomely attractive, as in shayner maidel

SHLEP: to drag, especially something you don’t really need

SHLOCK: cheap, shoddy, or inferior

SHMENDRIK: a jerk or stupid person

SHMALTZ: excessively sentimental, gushing, flattering, over-the-top, corny (literally, chicken fat or grease)

SHMOOZ: to hang out and engage in friendly gossipy talk, chat, converse about nothing in particular

SHPIEL: a long, involved (sales) pitch

SHTICK: something you are known for doing, an entertainer’s routine, a gimmick to draw attention

TCHOTCHKA: an inexpensive trinket or collectable, a toy, a knick-knack

TSETUMMELT: confused, bewildered

TSORISS: suffering, woes, serious troubles

TUCHES: backside, bottom (American slang is “tush”)

UNGABLUZUM: to look as if one is going to cry

YENTE: busybody or gossiper (usually used for females)

YIDDISHER KEP: a smart person (literally means “Jewish head”)

ZAFTIG: full, rounded, plump (usually used to describe a woman’s figure)

ZETZ: a strong blow or punch

SHLUB: an insensitive, ill-mannered person, a clumsy individual

ZIE GEZUNT: wishing someone good health (“be healthy” or “be well”)