

(updated version 4/6/2021)

**Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum**  
**Congregation Beit Simchat Torah**  
**Introduction to Yiddish Culture and Literature in Translation**  
**Spring 2021**

In this class, we will be learning about the culture and literature of Eastern European Jews. We will be studying literature in translation. Of course, this is a brief overview that I hope will inspire you to continue to study and learn and continue to love and appreciate the depths of this legacy.

Many of the short stories are found in the Treasury of Yiddish Stories and poetry will be distributed to class registrants. If at all possible, please purchase or get from the library:

1. Sholem Aleichem, Tevye the Dairyman. There are many editions, if you have one at home, that's fine, if you want to buy one, get Tevye The Dairyman, and the Railroad Stories, Translated by Hillel Halkin (Shoken Books: NY, 1987).
2. Treasury of Yiddish Stories by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (Available from the Yiddish Book Center online store <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>)

In preparation for the class read the Introductions of both books! Reading assignments for each week are listed below. I can't be too sure of our pace so feel free to start reading as you want. There will be NO TEST so don't worry if you don't want to do the homework. Showing up is just fine.

**Week 1-2:**

Introduction to Eastern European Jewish Life:

- History overview, maps and glossary
- What does "Yiddish" mean? What is Yiddish?
- What do we mean by Yiddish literature?
  
- What is Eastern Europe?
- What is the Pale of Settlement? What are the 3 partitions of Poland? Why are they relevant?
- Yiddish pre-Khurbn (1939) and post-Khurbn (1945) in the United States, South America, Israel, Soviet Union and Birobidzhan

- Beginning of Jewish life in Poland from museum in Warsaw  
<https://www.polin.pl/en/common-roots>

**Read:** Isaac Bashevis Singer: “Nobel Lecture, 1978”

Print out a map of Eastern Europe of approximately 1700 and 1900. (to be sent to class registrants)

**Watch movie:** “Who Will Write Our History” (Amazon Prime)

**Watch:** <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/ringelblum/index.asp>

If your family comes from any part of Eastern Europe, try and find it on the map, read a wiki article or other source about that region and its history of Jews.

### **Week 3: Pre-Modern Yiddish Literature and the Beginnings of Modern Yiddish Literature**

- **Pre-modern** Yiddish Literature
- *Bovo-Bukh, Tsene urene,*
- Religious Yiddish writings and Secular Yiddish Literature

Introduction to **Modern** Yiddish Literature

3 Founders:

- **Mendele Mocher Sforim**
- (Sholem Yankev Abramovich, 1836-1917);
- **Sholem Aleychem**
- (Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich, (1859-1916)
- **Isaac Leib (YL) Peretz** (1852-1915)

**Read:**

- Introduction to “A Treasury of Yiddish Stories”.
- Mendele Mocher Sforim: “The Calf” in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg eds, “A Treasury of Yiddish Stories”.

### **Week 4 - 5: Sholem Aleychem**

(Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich, 1859-1916)

**Read:** Introduction to **Tevye the Dairyman**

**Read:** Tevye the Dairyman (Buy or get from Library – there are many editions, if you have one at home, that’s fine, if you want to buy one, get Tevye The Dairyman, and the Railroad Stories, Translated by Hillel Halkin (Shocken Books: NY, 1987)

### **Week 6: YL Peretz (1852-1915)**

**Read:** Short stories: “If Not Higher” and “Devotion Without End” in “A Treasury of Yiddish Stories”

### **Week 7: Poetry**

- **Avraham Sutzkever** (1913-2010)
- **Kadya Molodovsky** (1894-1975)
- **Avrom Reyzen** (1976-1953)
- **Mordechai Gebirtig** (1877-1942)

*(To be distributed to class registrants)*

### **Week 8: Summary**

## **Resources:**

Polin: Museum of the History of the Polish Jews  
(Warsaw)

(<https://www.polin.pl/en>)

5 short films about Jewish life in Poland

National Yiddish Book Center (<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>)

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

(<https://www.yivo.org/>)

### **YIVO – Paper Brigade (Vilna)**

David Fishman, The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis: The True Story of the Paper Brigade of Vilna (University Press of New England, 2017)

Lecture and program at YIVO for book publishing by David Fishman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkR-Rp4MVuQ>

### **Oy neg shabbes (Warsaw)**

<https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/ringelblum/index.asp>

Movie: “Who Will Write Our History” (Amazon Prime)