

Learning Yiddish in New York City

by Rebecca Topper

Shalom aleichem! Ich heys Rivke. Ich voyn in Houston, Texas, vu ich bin a studentke, ober shtam ich fun Atlanta, Georgia. Ich hob gelernt Yiddish far zeks vokhen dem zumer in New York mit YIVO (Yiddisher Vissenshaftlikher Institut). Ich hob gelernt tsu leyn, redn, un shraybn af Yiddish. Ich hob oykh gelernt lider tsu zingen af Yiddish! Take hob ich lib far dem shprakh – ich vil lernen nokh Yiddish in dem kumendike tseyt.

Hello! My name is Rebecca. I live in Houston, Texas, where I am a student, but I am from Atlanta, Georgia. I learned Yiddish for six weeks this summer in New York with YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research). I learned to read, speak, and write in Yiddish. I also learned songs to sing in Yiddish! I really like the language – I want to learn more Yiddish in the future.

This summer, I spent six weeks in New York City learning Yiddish at YIVO with the Uriel Weinreich Yiddish Summer Program. I went in with very few expectations for what I was going to learn, aside from basic language skills. I was placed into the Beginner I class alongside 20 other students, ranging in age from 17 to 37 and ranging in knowledge from no experience with the *aleph-beys* (alphabet) to a small amount of experience. The program consisted of language classes every weekday morning, with conversation, electives, and talks in the afternoons. Our morning classes covered grammar and literature, while the afternoon electives and seminars covered a wider range of topics. The afternoon electives I

chose to take, for example, were on the Yiddish short story, Jewish food, and the Yiddish press. We also had programming with our cohort, like a trip to *Yiddish Hoyz*, which is a center for Yiddish in New York, and a tour of the Lower East Side.

I learned an incredible amount in the six weeks – both in terms of language and culture. All three of my language teachers, for grammar, literature, and conversation, were organized and effective. They responded to the class' concerns and adapted the lessons to fit our needs. They were fun and caring. I found a lot of satisfaction in being able to track the amount that I had learned throughout the summer – starting only with some knowledge of the alphabet and completing the program with basic conversation skills and elementary listening and reading skills. In addition to language skills, I also learned a lot of historical and cultural information about Yiddish. The history of Yiddish in Europe, and later in America, is history I was never taught in my eight years at Jewish day school. It is also material I had not had the opportunity to learn about at Rice. Many of the other students at YIVO knew a lot more about Yiddish history or were already involved in contemporary Yiddish culture. I was therefore somewhat of an outlier, but I enjoyed learning from the other students and their interests, as well as from the classes and lectures.

Throughout the course of the program, I also learned a lot of Yiddish songs. A song was taught in every language class over the course of the program, and there were also song workshops every Friday afternoon. I did not anticipate learning songs with the program, but I really enjoyed connecting with Yiddish musically.

Aside from the language itself, I am most excited to have learned about the contemporary culture around Yiddish. The cohort at YIVO was pretty self-selecting, and a lot of the other students were also Jewish people around my age, so I found it very easy to make friends. The cohort was full of interesting people from around the world, and it was really fun to get to know everyone. The vast majority of other students were either learning Yiddish for graduate school or because they wanted to be more involved in current Yiddish culture. Because of this, many of the other students were not only young and Jewish, but also politically left leaning and active in their political beliefs. The summer program therefore also exposed me to a section of the Jewish community of whose existence I had been simply unaware. The last two Friday nights of the program my friends and I had *Shabbos* together and those are my favorite memories of the summer.

Beyond the program itself, simply living in New York for six weeks provided its own array of experiences. I lived at the 92nd Street Y with my assigned roommate, Irena, and some of the other YIVO students. Some evenings, one of my classmates and I would work on our homework or practice reading together in the common space. One of my sisters and a good friend of mine from Rice were both also in New York this summer, and I really enjoyed getting to spend time with them around the city. Over the course of the summer we visited the Jewish Museum, the Whitney, and the Met. We also went on a boat tour and saw the Statue of Liberty (among other attractions). I went to a Yankees game and to Coney Island. I really enjoyed the time I had with my old friends and new friends I made on the program. In general, the city felt very accessible to me and the physical accessibility gave me a strong sense of independence.

Learning Yiddish this summer exposed me to a new way to connect with my religion and cultural heritage. I feel very lucky to be connected with a really interesting new community and to have spent my summer in New York.

Here are some photos from my summer:



My sisters and me!

There were two times we were all in the city at the same time – the middle sister, Rachel (on the left), had connecting flights in and out of New York so when she was in town we got to all spend time together. The oldest sister, Leah (in the middle), was in New York almost the entire time that I was.



At Yankee Stadium before a game

I went to a Yankees vs Blue Jays game with a Canadian friend from YIVO. (The Blue Jays lost but I had no allegiance to either team, so it worked out for me.)



Caroline and I at Coney Island

Caroline is my friend and suitemate from Rice who was in New York for an internship. We went to the beach with my roommate and a couple of my friends from YIVO and then to Coney Island.



Trying Russ & Daughters

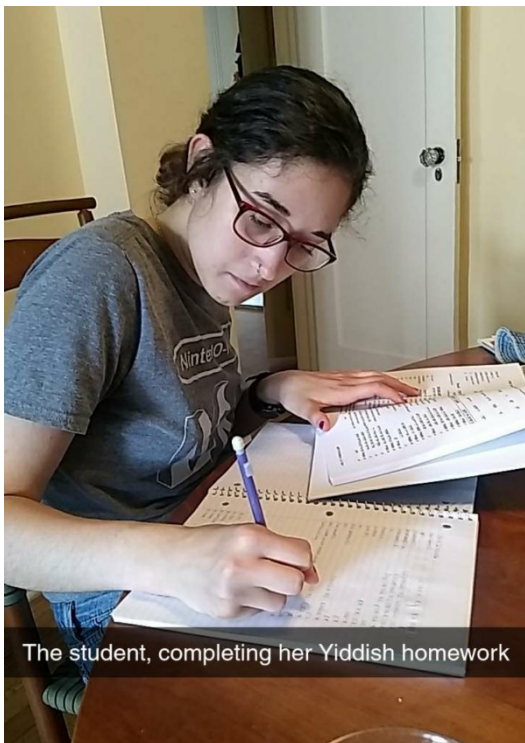
I tried Russ & Daughters' bagels with my YIVO friends, mostly from my class. It was a great lunch after a very hot tour of the Lower East Side.



Leah and I on a rooftop during Pride

A group of friends from YIVO and I met and joined in the Queer Liberation March on the day of the Pride celebration in New York.

Afterwards, I met my sister at her friend's apartment along the parade route.



Homework!

Photo and caption by my sister, Leah, whose apartment I occasionally did my homework in. I had homework almost every night, which the teachers collected, corrected, and returned to us. It was nice to work in a quiet, homey environment.

Leah and I would also occasionally cook dinner together; we sometimes took our food down to the Hudson and ate on a bench by the water.



By the Hudson

This photo was probably taken on the same night as the homework photo. Leah and I must have, in fact, gone down to eat by the Hudson.