

STUDENT ACTIVITY

Language, Identity, Cultural Memory, and Ways of Knowing

- *Epistemology*: How people come to know, understand, and make meaning in the world.
- *Positionality*: The experiences, identities, and social locations that shape how people see an issue.
- *Standpoint Reasoning*: Using a person's position in society to understand why they may interpret events differently from others.

This section explores Yiddish through a variety of cultural expressions, including language, literature, music, film, storytelling, and personal narratives. Using one or more resources from this section, examine how art and culture preserve memory, communicate identity, and shape belonging.

Guiding Question: How does your inheritance shape what you notice?

PART ONE

Identifying Positionality

Positionality refers to the identities, experiences, communities, and historical circumstances that shape how people understand the world. Review the selected resources and discuss:

- *Who is speaking, writing, creating, or being represented? What evidence from the resource helps you identify their positionality?*
 - *What aspects of their identity, community, or history appear in their perspective?*
 - *How have experiences such as immigration, assimilation, language loss, genocide, cultural preservation, or cultural revival influenced their viewpoints?*
-

“

*The **fate of a language can be as unpredictable as the fate of a people** ... In 1945, the future of Yiddish looked bleak. Millions of **its speakers had been murdered**, and the audience for Yiddish literature was practically wiped out. Many **survivors focused on learning ... the languages they needed to build new lives** ... But nearly 60 years later ... the melodies our grandparents laughed and cried to are played in places where twenty-somethings gather, from New Orleans jazz clubs to Montreal cafés.”*

-Aviya Kushner, award-winning author

PART TWO

Examining Epistemology

Epistemology refers to ways of knowing and understanding the world. Using examples from the selected resources, discuss:

- *How is knowledge passed inside language? How might that knowledge be different from information that learned solely through a textbook, second-hand story, or historical account?*
- *What knowledge about culture, identity, memory, belonging, or lived experience emerges through understanding the language?*
- *In what ways can language carry culture, memory, values, or ways of seeing the world?*
- *What knowledge might be lost when a language declines or the majority of its speakers disappears?*

PART THREE

Applying Standpoint Reasoning

Standpoint reasoning asks us to consider how social position and lived experience influence interpretation. Choose one idea, quotation, story, or scene from a resource in this section and guide students to analyze:

- *How does the creator's or community's standpoint shape their interpretation of language, identity, memory, or belonging? What insights become visible because of that standpoint?*
- *Why is it important to consider multiple standpoints when studying culture, history, and identity?*



DIVE DEEPER

Yiddish is one of many Jewish languages, and Yiddish culture is part of **a large tapestry of Jewish epistemologies**. Jewish immigrant stories from the Middle East and North Africa can be taught using the “[Sephardi and Mizrahi Education Toolkit](#).” You can also learn and teach about [Libyan Jews](#) using personal stories, history, and cultural artifacts.

THE YIDDISH REVIVAL



Yiddish Resistance Art Print by cartoonist Emily K.

“

Yiddish has always been more than just a means of communication. It is a guardian of Jewish culture, tradition, and heritage.

-Ghila Amati

“

*Some survivors focused on **learning the languages they would need to rebuild their lives ... during the second half of the 20th century, Yiddish was repressed by forced assimilation***

-Shaked Karabelnicoff

Discover

LEARN BASIC FACTS
ABOUT YIDDISH

READ ABOUT THE
CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
OF YIDDISH

QUEERING YIDDISH



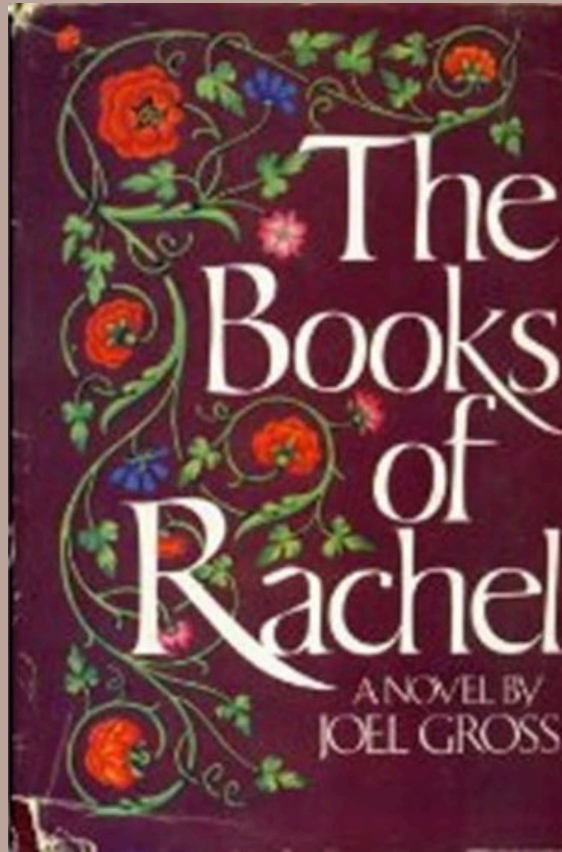
I first learned to be queer by being Jewish. That is, by the time I came out as a lesbian I had already learned to love being **part of an outsider community** and to **value the perspective it offered on the world at large.** Being Jewish made coming out as a young lesbian that much easier. I am certain this oft-noted parallel is part of the reason for perennially large numbers of queers at Yiddishist gatherings. Yiddish itself has been relegated over time to the marginalia of an already marginal population, so Queerness and Yiddishism by now seem a natural shidekh.*

-Alicia Svigals

*Also spelled *shidduch*, this Yiddish word literally means a traditional arranged marriage, the author uses it here to describe a perfectly fitting partnership between two marginalized identities that naturally understand and support one another on the fringes of society.

READING RECOMMENDATION

AN INTERGENERATIONAL NOVEL



This novel tells a story of migration, immigration, repetitive refugee experiences across five generations - and an uncertainty about where the family is from. The prologue begins in 1979 New York with a daughter's wedding-eve question, "Do you really think we came from Spain?" and a father's response: "I don't know. The name of the stone is Spanish." *The Books of Rachel* is a sweeping historical epic that chronicles a Sephardic Jewish family over 500 years. It follows the family through a magnificent heirloom (a stone) passed down to the firstborn daughter of every generation, each named "Rachel." Told in five parts, the novel moves through Inquisition-era Spain, 17th century Venice (pogroms), 18th century Berlin, pre-Mandate Jerusalem under Ottoman rule, WWII-era England, and, finally, 20th century United States.