

since I took such blows. Still and all, one thing has nothing to do with the other. I prefer your face to your fists, may they wither. I promise you that when I have time, I'll get to know you a little better. In the meantime, I am busy, I must go. Be well and strong, send regards and write."

Leibel Rafalovitch, the 13-year-old son of the richest man in town, and Reizel Spivak, the 14-year-old daughter of the poor cantor, fall in love with the theatre and with each other during the week that a ragtag Yiddish theatre troupe comes to town, and separately resolve to run away with the actors. In so doing, they create a chain of circumstances that irreparably harms their families, and changes the lives of many others.

Although their love for each other burns brightly, and occasionally they're even in the same city, they meet again only after each has journeyed far, become famous and broken hearts.

Told in cliffhanger short chapters (the novel was originally serialized), the narrative sweeps us from a small *shtetl* in Bessarabia, through large European cities, to London and then New York, and keeps us in total suspense about the fate of the hero and heroine until the last brilliant, satisfying and surprising pages. Early in the novel, on the night they speak their young love to each other, they timidly sit together watching their townspeople put out a fire, and look up at the stars. Reizel worries that the stars are falling. Leibel reassures her with youthful

certainty: "Every star is a person's soul. Wherever the soul goes, the person goes. That's why we imagine the stars are falling. But stars don't fall—they wander." And wander these people do.

It was time for a new translation. The previous 1952 translation not only abridged the work, but actually changed the ending! Aliza Shevrin has captured Sholem Aleichem's enormous range of description, characterization and dialogue. True, the translation might have benefited from a few footnotes to explain some of the untranslatable humour and topical references, but that's a minor cavil. *Wandering Stars* is a compelling work. It should interest any reader who looks for depth, emotion, insight, a good read, and transcendent vision. ♦

WORDS ON FIRE: THE UNFINISHED STORY OF YIDDISH

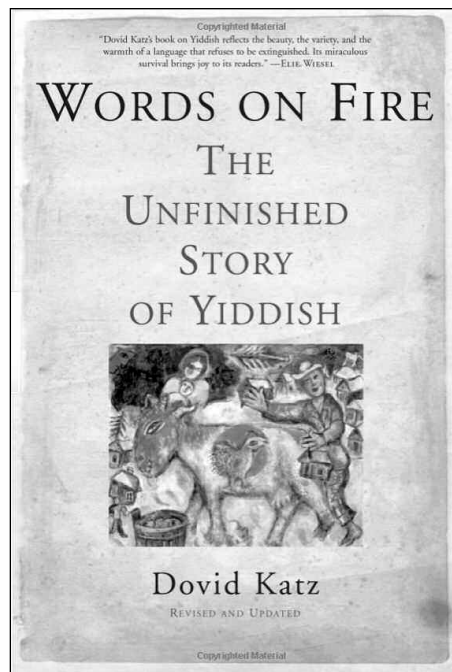
Dovid Katz. Basic Books, New York, 2004, 430 pages. (Revised edition, 2007, 512 pages.)

Reviewed by Gerry Kane

The questions are: is there any heat left in the words represented by the title of Dovid Katz's new book *Words on Fire*? Does this book suggest that the "words on fire" have cast heat and sparked continuing interest in Yiddish in the general, English-speaking Jewish community, or are the "words on fire" the dying embers of a once-living language which English-speaking Jews don't much care about?

I ask these questions because the joy of reading Dovid Katz is to take pleasure in the views of a great contrarian. For the purpose of setting out a contrarian's view about my beloved *mama loshn*, my mother tongue, I will touch on

GERRY KANE is a graduate of the Morris Winchevsky school in Toronto and the former chair of the Committee of Yiddish in Toronto, and a founder of the Secular Jewish Association/Oreynu. He lectures in Yiddish and English on secularism and on Yiddish literature.



the key positions that Katz takes with regard to the origins and development of Yiddish and what he sees as its future. I will also present the view of Harold Bloom, the eminent Yale literary scholar and native Yiddish speaker, who

doesn't agree that Yiddish has a future. In the November 8, 2008 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Bloom reviewed the first publication in English of the complete two volumes of the *History of the Yiddish Language* by Max Weinreich. Weinreich, a founder of YIVO and the 20th century's most eminent historian of Yiddish, was one of Dovid Katz's teachers.

Harold Bloom's position is that the fire has gone out of the words. In his review of Weinreich, he points out that "Yiddish survived by its openness, but no language can survive the destruction of the small children who had begun to speak it What is gone forever is the tumult of a living language It is as though Yiddish has become a memorial volume with a blurred inscription, to steal a phrase from Kierkegaard."

Bloom makes several other points worth considering when facing the contrarian views of Dovid Katz. He makes the point that Yiddish was the Hamlet of languages, abounding in a questioning, text-centred Talmudic tradition. He also makes the point that the resurrection of Yiddish is

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blocked by English, as well as by Israeli Hebrew. “Neither American nor Israeli Jews are now a text-centered people Deep reading wanes and bilingualism is a vanishing phenomenon. Israel’s geographical isolation, surrounded by enemies, has helped compel it to adopt a Hebrew-English bilingualism, a pragmatic reminder that the Zionist nation remains part of the Exile while American Jewry [read Canadian] increasingly does not.” Quite simply, Canadian Jews, by and large, do not have a social or religious need for a second, distinctly Jewish language. Ergo, Yiddish will become a redoubt in various universities where scholars go to rake over the bones of what once was. While Katz wouldn’t argue about the need for the growth of university courses that teach Yiddish or do research in the history of Yiddish, he would argue vigorously with Bloom and other academics about the issue of Yiddish having lost its heat and street smarts and become a dead language.

It is because Katz believes that Yiddish is still a language with “words on fire” that I believe anyone with an interest in Yiddish should go through this book with an open mind. *Words on Fire* is one of the best histories of the Yiddish language that I have ever read. It is beautifully written. It immediately disposes of the popular theory that the main features of Yiddish correspond to German. In fact, like his teacher Weinreich, Katz holds that Yiddish “doesn’t correspond in its main features to any one German dialect...” (From Leonard Prager’s review of *Words on Fire*, in *Mendele*, Oct. 29, 2004.)

In Yiddish we talk about “*Di Goldene Keyt*—the golden chain” that links our present to our past. Dovid Katz in his *Words on Fire* also presents us with a chain. Yiddish, he holds, is part of an ancient Jewish Language Chain that is made up of Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic, so that in a time when Jews were steeped in reading, the internal, Talmudic culture of the Jews was trilingual. Since we have become unilingual

(English in the case of Canada and Hebrew/English in the case of Israel) there is no future for secular Yiddishism. However, there is a future for Yiddish in that one group of Jews who demographically are producing more children than any other group of Jews—the ultra-Orthodox, for whom Yiddish is both *mama loshen* and a medium to be used in learning. The millions of Orthodox Jews who speak Yiddish will give the lie to Bloom’s contention that Yiddish is dead because there are no children to speak it.

It is the Orthodox Jews who, because of their faith focus, will continue the trilingual chain into the future. Yes, Katz concedes that the language will change. It is a fusion language, and future generations of Yiddish speakers will attach new words to Yiddish that come from the surrounding cultures in which they live, just as we attached the German, Slavic and English words we know as part of the Yiddish spoken by our immigrant parents or grandparents who were still close to the trilingual tradition and were comfortable with the allusions to religion in which so much of our modern Yiddish literature is steeped.

What makes *Words on Fire* so easy to read and absorb is that Katz presents his point of view in an easy-to-read style, without a single footnote to break the flow of his story. Make no mistake, there are two levels of “words on fire” in this book. The first you find in the heat of Katz’s very learned point of view that gives him hope for the future of Yiddish. The other you find in the heat he generates in making us aware of the breadth, depth and coherence of the thousand-year-old instrument of communication which is Yiddish. Katz presents the links in his trilingual chain by telling us stories about the people who propelled Yiddish as a language and stories about words that make his point that the chain is growing. Read his history of the word *mazl*—luck—which traces back through all the parts of our trilingual history.

The question which quickly

began to impose itself on me as I read *Words on Fire* was: do secular Jews, like myself and readers of *Outlook*, have a place in securing “words on fire”—in keeping the heat in the language? Katz says yes. He tells us how to go about keeping Yiddish alive in a secular milieu. He says, “Secular literary Yiddish can be saved... as a virtual network... of small serious islands of culture in the internet age. It is alive when a Yiddish Literature seminar or summer course is conducted in Yiddish with the original texts with students who write their papers in Yiddish and discuss their work in Yiddish” (*Words on Fire*, p. 395). And, I would suggest, it is alive when a magazine like *Outlook* presents the treasures of Yiddish poetry in both the original Yiddish and English translation.

Katz also makes the point that the spark in keeping Yiddish alive in the secular world will be through the efforts of Yiddish masters, those who have come out of our universities, who have learned a lot of classical Hebrew in its Ashkenazic incarnation and some Aramaic; “he or she must be well acquainted with various ancient texts that are as alive as today’s date to the Yiddish ear, as well as a religious life that he or she may not be part of” (p. 396).

However, he sees “the future millions of Yiddish speakers, and the Yiddish literature of a hundred and two hundred years hence, will come from the rapidly expanding Hasidic communities around the world. Our task, in the meantime, is to have enough fire in us to keep alive little islands of serious Yiddish-in-Yiddish education, cultural programs, literature, and let us hope, some worthy creativity, too” (p. 396).

If you feel you should have one history of the Yiddish language on your book shelf, make it *Words on Fire*. It is a beautifully written story that will hold you page after page. Hopefully, reading *Words on Fire* will also enflame your interest in learning Yiddish and keeping it alive as a part of your secular Jewish life. ♦