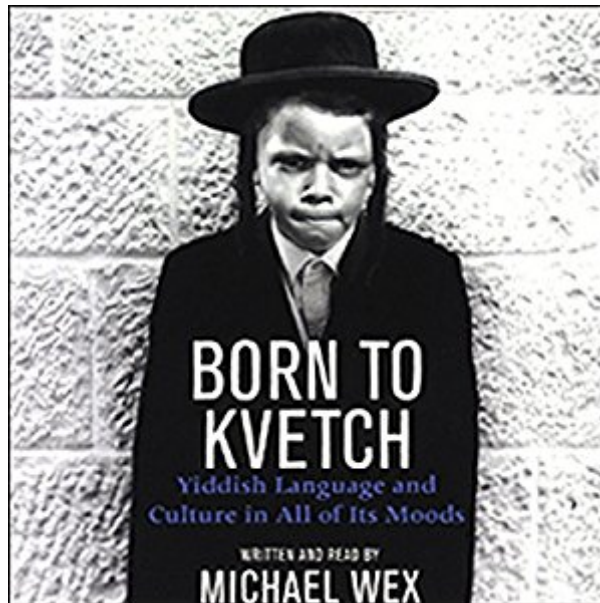


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# Born To Kvetch: Yiddish Language And Culture In All Of Its Moods



## Synopsis

A delightful excursion through the Yiddish language, the culture it defines and serves, and the fine art of complaint. Throughout history, Jews around the world have had plenty of reasons to lament. And for a thousand years, they've had the perfect language for it. Rich in color, expressiveness, and complexity, Yiddish has proven incredibly useful and durable. Its wonderful phrases and idioms impeccably reflect the mind-set that has enabled the Jews of Europe to survive a millennium of unrelenting persecution . . . and enables them to kvetch about it! Michael Wex—professor, scholar, translator, novelist, and performer—takes a serious yet unceasingly fun and funny look at this remarkable kvetch-full tongue that has both shaped and has been shaped by those who speak it. Featuring chapters on curse words, food, sex, and even death, he allows his lively wit and scholarship to roam freely from Sholem Aleichem to Chaucer to Elvis. Perhaps only a khokhem be-layle (a fool, literally a "sage at night," when there's no one around to see) would care to pass up this endearing and enriching treasure trove of linguistics, sociology, history, and folklore—an intriguing appreciation of a unique and enduring language and an equally fascinating culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

You can buy a book about Yiddish. You can buy a book about Jewish life. You can buy a book about religious observance. Or you can save the shipping costs and buy *Born To Kvetch*, one of the best books I've ever read about the Ashkenazi Jewish experience. I would compare this wonderful new book to Maurice Samuel's *The Gentleman and the Jew* for its erudition and vision. And Michael Wex is a whole lot funnier than Maurice Samuel. You will be laughing uncontrollably (WARNING:

may cause embarrassment if you read this on the subway in the morning, as I did) while you learn more than you ever wanted to about the Talmud, the yiddish word for toilet paper and the REAL meaning of kvetching. Don't hesitate, buy it today and be cursing your friends in yiddish tomorrow.

English books on Yiddish generally fall into two categories: the oh isn't it a cute colorful language angle; the scholarly tome that sucks the life out of the language. Mr. Wex has done Yiddish a great service and has written a book that avoids both of these pitfalls. Beneath the humor - and this is a very funny, well written book - is a very serious examination of Yiddish as a language inextricably tied to its religion. Very few people could have written a book as insightful as this one and still made it entertaining. Mr. Wex has the background - a Yeshiva bocher turned secularist - and mindset to carry it off with aplomb. Some people might complain that the examination of Yiddish language and culture in this book is too harsh and well... kvetchadik. But there is pride for a language and culture long gone throughout this book. More than any book on Yiddish that I've read, this one rings true. The description of the culture of Chasidic education of children is particularly unflinching and mordantly accurate. Footnotes would help this book a great deal. But this is a fine achievement. Now if only they wouldn't have put someone else's photo next to the NY Times review. ;)

Aside from the rave reviews on this site I have read two other longer rave reviews, William Grimes in the 'New York Times' and Josh Lambert in J-books. Both claim that this book is not only tremendously funny but a very deep probe into the nature of Yiddish, and in fact Diaspora Ashkenazi experience. This is what Lambert has to say about the lead idea of the book. "Yiddish, Wex argues, is most comfortable when it's complaining. It's "a language that likes to argue with everybody about everything." He explains this as consistent with the Mishnaic scholars (who "disagree 99.8 percent of the time") and the principle of "aftselakhis"- "the impulse to do things only because someone else doesn't want you to." The kvetch, or complaint, is thus the basic unit of Yiddish thought, as developed over hundreds of years of Diaspora living: "kvetching becomes a way of exercising some small measure of control over an otherwise hostile environment." It is rare when we find a book which not only enriches our thought but makes us laugh outloud.

Michael Wex has masterfully reproduced the Ashkenazi Jewish experience in a colorful and humorous language, incorporating the Yiddish thought process that has emerged over many centuries. While the book has the initial impression of being rather funny, the reader soon grasps the intellectualism that resonates throughout the book, delving into the human element. It connects many

around the world, as one instinctively travels to the roots of a culture, intertwined with its ancestry as far as Biblical times. It is a fascinating book that should appeal to most people with an open and inquisitive mind, particularly when many of the phrases, the thought processes, and the humor which connects them have been used for so many decades. Kvetching, complaining so to speak, is more than a word, or a statement...it represents a way of thinking, a necessary reflex, a defense mechanism to gain advantage on an issue or an argument. It is informative, easy to read, enjoyable, and with the bonus of cultural and historical humor.

Here's MY "kvetch": Till now I thought my book on Yiddish, "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Learning Yiddish" was the very best book on the subject. Who told Wex to write such a funny, brilliant, erudite, insightful book - did I need this kind of competition? But I "fargin" him - and all you lovers of Yiddish out there. Buy mine if you can but DEFINITELY buy Wex's masterpiece - I loved it!!!! Rabbi Benjamin Blech

Not only is Mr. Wex funny, his book also has the ring of authenticity. This is not a book about literary Yiddish but rather, living Yiddish, replete with day-today expressions for what real people do: eat, eliminate, curse, and talk about other people having sex. Furthermore, to understand Yiddish, one must understand the Yid and the deep tie to Torah and observance. Mr. Wex writes as an insider, not an observer, and so comes up with the "real thing."

This book is hysterically funny! Even the most advanced intelligent Mensch will kvell and at the wisdom that goes beyond Kvetching. It goes back to the ancient roots of how insightful and indistinguishable Yiddish is. It's a language that ties so many together from the diaspora when Jewish geography has people kibitzing, or Oy Veying at news that might come from a simcha. It's a mitzvah for great reading, even for the savvy Yenta. And more than being funny, the book has reads with scholar material, rich in the roots of tradition and ancestry. It really brings meaning and understanding to kvetching. Just be prepared to roll in laughter! Mazel Tov, Michael Wex, and thank you for this wonderful book! Barbara Rose, Ph.D. author of Stop Being the String Along: A Relationship Guide to Being THE ONE and Know Yourself: A Woman's Guide to Wholeness, Radiance & Supreme Confidence

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