SHELDON: There's a concept in Yiddish called the Yiddish gas, the Yiddish street. And this simply means, like, you live in an environment where every transaction you do in your life, you go outside and you play with other kids, is in Yiddish. You go to the store, Yiddish transaction. You go to the doctor, it's Yiddish.

SARAH: This is “Heritage Words,” a podcast about the words we’ve inherited from our ancestors and the meaning they bring to our lives. “Heritage Words” is produced by the HUC Jewish Language Project, which raises awareness about Jewish ancestral diversity through the lens of language. I’m your host, Sarah Bunin Benor.

Today we have a guest interviewer, Douglas Hauer-Gilad. Douglas is a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, where I teach. He interviewed his uncle, Sheldon Londner, for an assignment for my class on Jewish languages. We found the interview so rich that we decided to share it on this podcast.

Sheldon “Shulem” Londner is a retired medical professional in Los Angeles. He’s the son of Polish Holocaust survivors who suffered the loss of over 100 family members. He grew up in a religious multilingual family that used Yiddish as their primary language, along with Polish, English, German, Swedish, Hungarian, Russian, and Hebrew. Both of Sheldon’s parents found delight in Yiddish wordplay, a trait Sheldon inherited and cherishes to this day. He never had formal Yiddish training, but he is the leader of a weekly Yiddish reading group, and he is very interested in Yiddish idioms.

In Doug’s interview, you’ll hear about many colorful Yiddish expressions and some harrowing stories of survival from Sheldon’s relatives. Enjoy the episode!

DOUG: I'm here today with Sheldon Londner in LA. We're in West Hollywood and we're going to talk a little bit about Sheldon's background, about his parents’ experiences during the war, and we're going to really get into some Yiddish in the next hour. So, Sheldon, thank you for agreeing to participate in a conversation today.

SHELDON: Avade—zikher. Farvos nisht? Ikh hob beser tsi tin? [Of course, for sure. Why not? I have something better to do?]

DOUG: Amazing. So, where were you born?

SHELDON: Cleveland, Ohio. 1955.

DOUG: And where were you raised?

SHELDON: We stayed in Cleveland up until the time I was seven, and then because of my mother's health—she had contracted TB and had to have one lung removed and moved to LA for the climate, because the climate was better, warmer. Although the irony was during those years, those were peak smog years here in LA, the climate was not that great, actually.

DOUG: And so she contracted tuberculosis?

SHELDON: In Auschwitz, yeah.

DOUG: In Auschwitz.

SHELDON: And she came to America, and after she married my dad, she ended up having a lung removed.

DOUG: And Sheldon, tell us a little bit about your family's background.

SHELDON: Sure. Both my parents are Polish survivors from Poland. I'll start with my mom. My mom was from a small village, which in Yiddish is known as Pshitik, and in Polish it's all consonants Przytyk. But Pshitik was famous because of the pogrom that happened there in 1936, the last pogrom before the war broke out in 1939. And Pshitik was where this pogrom happened. Compared to the scale of the other pogroms, like in other places in Eastern Europe or Russia, it was relatively small. But if you were to ask any survivor from Poland about Pshitik, everyone knew about it. So that's where my mother was from. Pshitik was a small place. My grandfather, Menachem Dovid, her father, was a religious fanatic. He divorced his first wife because she wasn't religious enough. And my mother was the product of the second marriage. And they lived on a small farm, I guess. My grandfather was straight out of Tevye. He was a schmatta handler. He sold rags and he had a horse and he would drive through the forest during the day at great personal risk because there were thieves ready to kill him to get the horse and cart. And he would talk to himself and say in Polish dwa to nie jedno which means two are not one, to make it sound as if there was somebody there. So my mother came from that background, a small little place. My father came from a city called Sosnovitz, which is in, like, southern Poland. And I remember being astonished the first time I looked at the map of Poland. Sosnovitz was less than—I think it must be not even 30 miles away from Auschwitz. But my father, even though he was so close, was never in Auschwitz like my mother. So my father was from a big city. Both my parents had different experiences. My mother at first was in the Lodz ghetto and then went to Auschwitz and somehow miraculously survived Auschwitz. My father—I don't know that he was ever in a death camp per se, but he was in different war camps and places like that. And I have a couple of stories I can tell. I don't like generally talking too much about the Holocaust, but I have a couple of stories I can tell about their survival. One with my father, he was in some camp and as was typical for many of these camps, the Germans didn't want to attract a lot of attention. So the camps would be located in rural areas, places that were not close to where there were a lot of people. So this particular camp was located next to a farmer's field. And because of the war effort, all the metal from everyone had been confiscated, right, to make bullets and bombs and things like that. And so my father, who was starving, traded a hammer for a loaf of dark Polish bread, which was—you could eat a loaf and you could survive off of that thing. It wasn't bread like we know nowadays. And as this trade was being made, a German officer at an Oberscharführer saw this and he came and he came over and hit my dad on the head and took the bread. So my father at the time, he knew he was going to die.

He vowed he wasn't going to die with an empty stomach. He found out where this Nazi officer was staying and he sneaks into his quarters. And there's the same officer who a minute ago had taken the bread, cut off a piece and was toasting it in a frying pan, heavy cast iron skillet. My father takes the hot frying pan, grabs it, and hits the guy over the head and almost kills him. Okay. So what's going to happen to a Jew who does this? Immediately going to shoot him or torture him or do something horrible? No. They take him to the commandant of the camp's office and he orders everyone to leave. It's him and my father. And he tells my father that he's happy that my father almost killed this guy. Because why? Because the commandant was from Berlin and the Oberscharführer was from Munich and they hated each other. But, he said, you're a Jew. You can't do this. So here's your punishment. He took a heavy stick. He says, I'm going to hit you one time on your back with this stick. And then every time after that, I'm going to hit the stick on the ground and you scream. That's one story. I just want to say this, everyone who survived has stories. I just know a couple of these. So a second story I know about my father is he was in another camp and it was the middle of the winter and they were making a porridge, maybe with oats or wheat, something like farina for all the guards to eat. It's the middle of winter. It's very cold. So my father and this other guy somehow sneak into the kitchen and they eat the porridge for 30 guards, right? So they line up all the prisoners and they don't even have to figure out who it is. Only two guys have stomachs that look like this, right? So they made them, both of them, dig holes for themselves in ground that was hard as concrete. And then they put them in the holes up to their necks and let them stay there overnight. The other guy succumbed to the elements. My father said he stayed warm because he was digesting all that food. On the other hand, there's a story about my mom. So this is really so unbelievable to me. In Auschwitz, they had roll call. And I don't know if it was once a day or twice a day, it was called appel or appeal. And she was so weak already that she couldn't stand. And they brought her a chair to sit down on. Now this boggles my mind because it was Auschwitz. And you would immediately be taken away to the gas chamber. Why that didn't happen, I don't know. All right, so enough with the stories. My parents both—and I think this was maybe typical for maybe European Jews at the time—they both were multilingual. My father spoke five languages: Yiddish, Polish, German, English, and some Russian. I remember one time we were watching Dr. Strangelove, and there's a scene where the Russian foreign minister is talking to the Russian prime minister in Russian. And suddenly my father is translating for me. I said, Ta, kenstu Rusish? I said how do you know Russian? And he said, it's because he had been in camps with Russian soldiers and learned some Russian. My mother spoke five languages: Yiddish, Polish, Swedish, Hungarian, English, and some Hebrew. I remember after my mother's death, I found her little—she had been rescued by the Swedish Red Cross. Not rescued. The Swedish Red Cross came in before the liberation. The Russians liberated Auschwitz. They came in right before, and they asked who wanted to go to Sweden for ze heilen, for healing. So my mother went, and so she learned Swedish. But when she was in Sweden, she was at a school called Bais Yaakov, which is a religious school for girls. And I discovered a notebook where she was teaching herself Hebrew using Yiddish, you know, on one side are the Yiddish words, on the other side are the Hebrew words, you know, and in a beautiful handwriting. So that's the background my parents came from. My mother's background was somewhat more religious than my father's, and they met in America. So here's one story about my father's arrival to America. On their way over, both of them—I found—after they both passed away, I found books on learning English. So my mother's

book was English for Swedish speakers, right, because my mother was fluent in Swedish, and my father's was English for German speakers. So my father arrives, this isn't Ellis Island, he's here in, like, early 50s, and my mother's here about the same time, and he gets off the boat, and he's looking around as he's just stepped onto American soil, and he sees for the first time in his life a black man, a man of color. And he can't stop looking, because in Poland, there were no people of color. The minority were the Jews, and the Jews were white, basically white-skinned. And so he's staring and staring at this guy, and the guy notices, and he comes over, and he starts speaking to my father in fluent Polish Yiddish. And this is my father's introduction to America, even the people who aren't Jewish speak Yiddish, okay. It turns out the guy was the warehouse manager for a Yiddish-speaking woman who owned a wholesale fish market. She had never learned to speak English, he had to learn to speak Yiddish, and he was down at the docks every day buying fresh fish.

DOUG: That's an incredible story.

SHELDON: So it's my father's introduction to America. My mother had a different path. In Sweden at this girl's school—she was there with a very close friend who just passed away just last year, Lola, who was from Lodz. And my mother originally had wanted, like so many of the girls in the school, to make aliyah to Israel. But she had TB, it was a no-go. And anyway, she probably wouldn't have survived, because in those early years, things were pretty rough in Israel, and somebody with a major health disease I don't think would have had an easy time with it. So she then was going to come to America. She had, like, a half-brother who had already survived the war, and she was going to be with him or something, I don't know exactly the history. But in order to come to the US, you couldn't come with a communicable disease like TB. So what did she do? Her friend Lola was a little younger than her. When you applied for your visa or entry papers, you had to show an x-ray, a recent x-ray, okay? So she couldn't take her own x-ray. It would have shown TB. So her friend Lola went and posed as her, and this apparently was not uncommon. And after my mom died, I found her entry papers, and there on one of the papers is a little, like, two-inch by two-inch photo of Lola's lungs as Sylvia Londner. So that's how my mom came into the country. Life for them after the war was not easy. My mother, she had physical problems, and then, like, as you might imagine, a lot of mental health issues as a result of being in the camps. And I had a younger brother who died when he was 10. I got very sick. So life was not easy. It was not the typical course for so many of the other survivors who, their lives improved considerably. I mean, nobody was going to get over what happened to them in the camps or having the loss of, in many instances, all their family. I grew up without any sense of relatives. I mean, my mother had her half-brother, and they had a big split, so I wasn't even close to that. But I grew up without relatives, and it wasn't until I was in Israel for the first time in 1974 after the Yom Kippur War when I met with a relative. My father's grandmother, my great-grandmother, had 18 children, and I met with one of his—he had dozens of cousins. So this older man was living in Haifa, and he brings out a picture of my father's family on his mother's side. This is his maternal grandmother. And there are 27 people in this picture. In the middle is my great-grandmother who couldn't have been more than 4'10", and my great-grandfather who wasn't much taller. They're surrounded by all their children and the spouses. And this picture was taken so early that my father's older sister, Rokhl, she was only,

like, one or two years old in the picture. So it was probably taken in the early 1900s. And at that moment in time, I understood what the loss was, how big that one family was. And that was just on his mother's side. I don't know much about his father's side.

DOUG: And Sheldon, when your parents talked about the Holocaust, did they speak to you in Yiddish?

SHELDON: Oh, Yiddish was my first language. In linguistics, there's a term called code switching, where you seamlessly flow between—I'm sure you can do this, Doug, between Hebrew and English. And we would do this all the time between Yiddish and English, say something in Yiddish and switch over to English. But the predominant language in the house, the daily vernacular, was Yiddish. And my parents did not just speak Yiddish. Without my knowing it at the time, they were Yiddishists. They were enthusiastic lovers of the language, even though my mother, who was born in 1928 and was only 11 when the war broke out, never really had any formal education in Yiddish. And my father, he went to some religious training, and he graduated from a gymnasium, which is like having some college under your belt. But even though they never had any formal training in Yiddish, they both loved the language and loved playing with the words. There's a well-known Yiddish writer, the most famous Yiddish writer, Sholem Aleichem. And Sholem Aleichem's mother died, and he had a stepmother who was notoriously not nice to him. But she was also famous for her curses. And I remember the first time I looked up the curses, they only filled up two pages. And I said, what's this? I go, feh, my mother had hundreds, and she was inventing new ones all the time. So we spoke Yiddish. And when they wanted to keep secrets, they spoke Polish. But of course, both my brother and I quickly learned all the dirty words. And as an adult, I sometimes, I wouldn't say revel, but I sometimes would like to do the shock effect. If I would meet elderly survivors, I would say something that I knew wasn't nice in Polish, and everyone would turn color. I didn't realize until years later, when I met my wife, Joyce—we weren't married yet—and she introduced me to secular Yiddish. This boggled my mind. The first time I encountered people who weren't religious—I grew up, both my parents were modern to ultra-Orthodox. At one point, my mother even wore a wig called a sheitel. And I went to ultra-Orthodox schools when I was a kid. So my experience growing up in pretty much Holocaust-heavy religious—even people who weren't religious at one time, but—community, encountering people who were not religious who spoke Yiddish, it was like visiting Mars to me. It was so unusual. It's just striking to me, I just turned 71, that at the latter part of my life, I've so heavily involved myself in Yiddish, which was simply the language, our daily vernacular in the house. I just developed such an interest in it. And it wasn't until I met this community of secular Yiddishists, which had been huge in America, before the Holocaust survivors came there, people were predominantly secular Jews speaking Yiddish. It wasn't until that point in time that I realized the gift that my parents had given me by both them speaking Yiddish and also by them being wordsmiths and creating words and loving that language. Because a very common experience—like, there was an organization we used to go to that doesn't exist anymore, Los Angeles Yiddish Culture Club, that was founded in the 30s. Joyce had been going there for some years before I met her, and then we started going there, and I became active in this organization. It was on its death legs at the time. But all the children of those uber-devoted Yiddishists, the people who would come together twice a week and listen

to scholarly talks about literature or esoteric academic things in Yiddish, none of their kids were like me. Maybe they understood Yiddish, maybe at one time they spoke Yiddish, but nobody was interested in keeping it up. So I was an oysnam, in Yiddish means an exception. And my brother too, until he passed. There's a concept in Yiddish called the Yiddish gas, the Yiddish street. And this simply means, like, you live in an environment where every transaction you do in your life, you go outside and you play with other kids, is in Yiddish. You go to the store, Yiddish transaction. You go to the doctor, it's Yiddish. Now, if you're living in Poland, obviously the outside world is going to be predominantly Polish, unless you're in a 90% Jewish, you know, where 90% of people are Jewish. But the concept of the Yiddish gas is that you're in an environment where 24 hours a day you're exposed to that. So, for me, growing up in America, you know, in an environment, highly assimilated environment, to learn Yiddish so well and speak it so naturally and fluently was exceptional. I mean, the only kind of places you'll encounter this now are in some of the Hasidic communities, where they're set apart from the rest of the world, that they might conduct every aspect of their lives in Yiddish.

DOUG: And Sheldon, you have such a deep connection to the history of Poland and Polish Jewry. And when you talk about your family's experiences, there's an immediacy that you have to Yiddish. You have today this wave of people learning Yiddish who don't necessarily have that historical feel. What do you think about this resurgence of Yiddish with people who are coming at it—

SHELDON: I would say, it isn't just Yiddish, this would be a problem with any language. Because it's not the daily vernacular, somebody can achieve a high proficiency in a language, and I think you managed to do that. But will you ever be anywhere near as you are proficient in English? No, no way. I've been speaking Yiddish since I was a kid, and I know damn well that I cannot express myself with an extremely high level of discourse in Yiddish as well as I do in English. I can come close, but I'm not anywhere near— the sophistication isn't there. Because there's no Yiddish gas. There's an expression in Yiddish. Ikh red tsu kluge menschen. Tsu vemen redstu? Ikh red tsu zikh aleyn. So in order—I talk to intelligent people. To who are you talking? I talk to myself. So that's what I have to do to practice my Yiddish. I mean, occasionally I'll encounter—like, they're all gone now, but there were Holocaust survivors. And I remember there's a social event that happens once a year, it's called Yiddish Vokh. It's a group of Yiddishists, secular Yiddishists, who come together somewhere in New York, upstate New York. And the conceit of it is everything is conducted in Yiddish. Everyone's speaking Yiddish all the time. When we were there in 2005, I hung out with the older people as survivors because I felt, that's who I felt most comfortable with speaking Yiddish. So to answer your question, Doug, I think that the people who are entering it now, I mean, I'm sure everyone has this realization that because they're not speaking Yiddish all the time, they'll just never be able to attain that fluency. They'll learn enough probably to understand text on a high level. And of course, when you're reading, you can always go to a dictionary. But speaking fluently, a completely different skill set. And so I just don't believe it's possible because of the lack of the Yiddish gas. Unless you live in a Hasidic community, or unless you live in—some of the secular Yiddishists have tried to establish little communities in New York, or there's a place called Yiddish Farm. But these are small little projects. And in Poland, when you had millions of Jews living at—even then in

Poland, things were changing. People maybe weren't speaking Yiddish as much. And there was more of an assimilation of people coming to speak Polish. But still, you had an environment where you could conduct all your affairs in Yiddish if you wanted to. And without that, I don't see how anyone will ever be able to achieve that kind of fluency in the language.

DOUG: So, Sheldon, do you ever use Yiddish at home in your day-to-day life with Joyce?

SHELDON: Yeah, I would have to say—and this is not a joke—sometimes when I get angry, really angry, I will break into Yiddish because I know a lot of juicy curses in Yiddish. And if you want to talk about a Pavlovian response, that's Joyce responding to that. She really, really gets upset when I get angry at her in Yiddish.

DOUG: So Joyce, what happens when he starts in Yiddish?

JOYCE: He always comes down to, ver veys vas der nar hot in zinen, who knows what the fool's thinking. And when he says that, I see red. Nothing makes me angrier than when he insults me in Yiddish, because I know he really means it. I see red when he—

SHELDON: She really does. I fear for my life.

JOYCE: and then we're off and running.

DOUG: So Yiddish gets deployed—

SHELDON: As a ballistic missile.

DOUG: As a ballistic missile.

JOYCE: Nuclear.

DOUG: That's amazing. And when you were growing up, did you have any friends in your universe who were also Yiddish speakers?

SHELDON: No, I went to religious school and most of my friends were kids from religious school. And I'm sure—I don't know, but I'm imagining many of them, their parents were survivors. I never heard any of them speaking Yiddish. Maybe they did at home, I don't know. But we never spoke Yiddish among ourselves. I grew up in a community of Holocaust survivors who were religious. So I would speak it to people of my parents' generation, but never their children. They may have known it, but we never communicated in that language. It was always English.

DOUG: And in terms of your mom and dad, which language did they have the best command of?

SHELDON: Yiddish and Polish. And they could do the code switching like I referred to earlier between Yiddish and Polish. And I'm just remembering now as you're asking me this, my mother was born in 1928. My father was born in 1919. And my mother—so she was only 11 when the war breaks out. My father's already grown. He's like 19. And he's gone through gymnasium, which is like the equivalent of a couple of years of college. And yet, when it came time to write in Yiddish—again, neither of my parents had formal training—my mother was always the one writing the letters in Yiddish. It was a very simplistic Yiddish, I would say. My father would sometimes occasionally write a word or phrase in Yiddish. But I don't think he ever would have tried to write a letter in Yiddish. I don't know why. He certainly would have been able to, he just, he never did. When The Forward, the Yiddish newspaper that is now entirely digital, which stopped doing paper a couple of years ago—paper editions—they had a request once, send us in family memorabilia. Okay. So I had a box. Okay, let me backtrack. If you watch the Olympics, a couple of Olympics ago, maybe it was the last one, the summer Olympics, there were swimmers with red marks on their back. And the reason the red marks were there was because they had undergone a treatment called cupping, which is where you take a glass jar, fill it with some alcohol, light a match. And as the flame burns, it extinguishes all the oxygen and you put it on somebody's back. And it sucks on that part of the back. And it's some theory of middle ages, humors or something. I don't know what the theory is and why it works, but you can always tell when somebody has this done because their back is full of these red marks from their skin getting sucked out. Well, my father did this to my mother and in Yiddish it's called bankes. And I found a box after they died. And there in the box, on the side of the box, my father had written in Polish banki, which is the Polish name for bankes. And my mother, inside, in Yiddish, had written bankes. Polish was used when they wanted to keep things from us. The thing that amazes me most about my mother, I think my mother had even a greater aptitude for languages than my father was. The Hungarian Jews came to Auschwitz in the latter part of the 1944. How did my mother learn fluent Hungarian? And I knew she was fluent because when you can have a conversation without any pause, that's fluency. And my mother could do that. So how did she learn Hungarian, Doug, you said you studied it—a notoriously difficult language.

DOUG: Very hard.

SHELDON: In a couple of months, she did. And my mother spoke an unaccented English. My father would—I think he was joking around, but he would do stuff, like—he knew how to say protein or fruit, but he would pronounce it as it was written, protein or fruit, right? I think it was a joke. I remember I, when I was in high school, I had a Webster's high school dictionary for students. And after my dad passed away, I found this dictionary, and every other page, there was my father with underlined words on every page, he'd been trying to improve his vocabulary, English vocabulary. So both my parents spoke in English plenty too, but mostly Yiddish, I would say, and Polish for the secrets.

DOUG: And the first time you went to Israel was 1974?

SHELDON: 74, right after the Yom Kippur War.

DOUG: And did you speak any Yiddish at Israel or?

SHELDON: Oh my God, Doug, that was strange. I don't know why I did this. So I was 19 and I had just survived a life-threatening illness. Before I went to Israel—now, bear in mind, I grew up without relatives. So here I am meeting relatives, albeit distant ones, for the first time in my life. And I made up my mind with my parents' generation, I was only going to speak Yiddish, with their kids, only English. I don't know why I adapted this stance. When I did try to speak Hebrew, because of the religious training, like, if I want to know where the bathroom was, as if I was saying, whereforth is the chamber with the pots, right? I didn't know Modern Hebrew, even though we probably had studied that too. But that was what I did. Yiddish with my parents' generation—and I didn't want to try to talk Hebrew, even though I could have passed by on some rudimentary level in English with their children. Everyone knew English, even if badly, but everyone knew English.

DOUG: And did the kids—

SHELDON: None of them spoke Yiddish.

DOUG: None of them spoke Yiddish.

SHELDON: No, and if they did, maybe it was a couple of words. Nobody spoke Yiddish. I'll tell you one story, Doug, about secrets and how people kept things. I don't even know how many siblings my father had, but his oldest brother married their first cousin. And they had a kid—and this is before the war—they had a kid, and the husband and the kid did not survive. So, his cousin, Chana, makes her way to Israel, and encounters a man, a Polish man, who was—who had come to Israel before the war and had fought originally with the British Army, and then later in the Palmach or something, and they got married. And as was classical, when you came to Israel, especially from a place like Poland, you immediately adopted a Hebrew name based on your Polish name. So, his name in Poland had been Birnbaum, pear tree, and in Hebrew it became Agassi. So, Chana Agassi. So, I show up, and Chana had never—she had two sons who were a little bit older than me—she had never told them of her previous life. They knew she had been in the war, she was a survivor, but they did not know that their mother, once they had a half-brother, they didn't know any of this. So, I show up, and I never understood how she explained to them, who am I, who am I, you know. And, there were secrets kept.

DOUG: And in terms of your relationship to Yiddish, it's a very tight relationship.

SHELDON: I couldn't get rid of it if I wanted to, Doug. I mean, I was brought up, if you're looking at a range of observance, I was brought up somewhere between Modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox, and I managed to burn a lot of that out of my brain conscientiously, because I felt so betrayed by faith. But Yiddish, I can't get rid of that. It's in my head. I mean, people say that one of the ways you can determine fluency in a language is if you dream, and I dream in Yiddish. I've dreamt plenty of times in Yiddish, where I'm talking to my parents or talking to somebody in Yiddish. I'll be sitting at a desk somewhere, minding my own business, suddenly I

hear my parents' voice in my head, speaking Yiddish to me, you know? I can't get rid of it. It's part of me.

DOUG: Did you want to share some Yiddish?

SHELDON: Okay. So, you had asked about Yiddish words, but I think it's better to talk about Yiddish proverbs. There's a whole category of these words in English. We use words like proverbs, aphorisms, saws, like it's an old saw, or sayings. Okay. So, there's a whole category of these in Yiddish, and Yiddish is famous for both its curses and also its irony. Okay. So, first I'll start out with a—I've already mentioned this—some Polish expressions that my parents used. So, my grandfather, when he'd be traveling in the forest by himself in order to avoid basically carjacking, wagon jacking, he would talk to himself and he would say in a loud voice, dwa to nie jedno, two are not one. And when Joyce and I got married, I thought, what better thing to put as the first line of our ketubah, our marriage contract, than this phrase that my grandfather, Menachem Dovid, used, dwa to nie jedno. So, that's literally the first thing in our ketubah. And here's one, this is one of my favorites. My mother, when she would see two opposites, like a couple, like the man would be very tall and the woman would be short, she would say Put i Patachon. I had no idea. I thought, okay, it refers probably to people. I had no idea. And later on, I began to think it meant Laurel and Hardy. And it wasn't until last year that Joyce and I seriously researched this. And we found out that there were two Danish comedians in the early 1900s who preceded Laurel and Hardy by some number of years. And they were the first comedic duo in silent films. And they were famous. They were on the same level as Chaplin, right? And their name in German, okay, get this, I don't know what their names in Danish was. The name was something, one of them was called The Lighthouse, because he was so tall. And the other one was called, the short one, was called The Streetcar, because he was short and squat. But in German, their name was Pat und Patachon. And I immediately got it. I said, my mother was saying, was a Polish version of the German names, Put, Pat, Put. And in Polish, instead of und, it's i, Put i Patachon. And my mother said it fast, Put i Patachon, Put i Patachon, Pat und Patachon. So that was amazing that I figured that out. Okay, here's some others. If you want to talk about irony, or creating a situation where you want to be somewhat sarcastic, like, you might say, Ta, hastu gezen mayne oygnbriln? Did you see my eyeglasses? And my father might think to me, oh, he's absent minded, and he can't remember where he put his glasses. He'll say, dos iz gefinen in dziewczyna shtibl. Well, dziewczyna in Polish means young girl. And shtibl is a place where a gathering of 10 or more men gathered to pray. There is no such thing. There can't be a gathering place for prayer with only women. Jewish law doesn't have that requirement for women. So when you say, you'll find it in the shtibl for young women, it's an impossibility. There's a very similar phrase, freg mikh bekheyrem. Kheyrem is somebody who's outcast from the community. You can't communicate with them. So if you say to somebody, somebody who's annoying you especially, like, you know, you would say, freg mikh bekheyrem, ask me in kheyrem. So it's basically telling them to piss off, you know, say—okay.

DOUG: So it's freg mikh bekheyrem.

SHELDON: Freg mikh bekheyrem.

DOUG: Ask me when I'm in kheyrem.

SHELDON: Which is impossible. You can't—nobody's get out.

DOUG: Okay. I may use that.

SHELDON: Okay. Okay. So here are two. Now, in Yiddish, there's this idea of the every man. So they might use, like, just like here in English, we say John, when we want to talk about, like, any person without a specific person, we might say John or Paul or something. In Yiddish, Moyshe is everyman. So just like Moses, so they take the concept of Moses, but Moyshe is every man. So there are two expressions, Moyshe Hoylekh and Moyshe Vigaisti. Moyshe Hoylekh means Moyshe walking, literally, and Moyshe Vigaisti, Moyshe, where are you going? And I always understood these to mean somebody who's klutzy, or not coordinated. I thought I understood what it meant. And then I looked up under the advice of my favorite rabbi, Google AI. And Google AI informed me that Moyshe Hoylekh means somebody who's walking with their shirt untucked. The tail of their shirt is sticking out. I'd never heard this. My mother always used it for clumsiness. All right. Zi makht vayivrakh. Doug, you've studied the Talmud. Vayivrakh is one of the chapters in Genesis where I think Jacob flees from Lavan, right, because he's in fear of his life. Well, we had a little dog, one of our several dogs, that my mother named Tzena, after the famous Hebrew song Tzena, Tzena. And she would speak to this dog in Yiddish. And when she would get the dog excited and the dog would start to run, she would say, gib a kuk - zi makht vayivrakh. Vayivrakh means to run away, to flee. So she'd use a biblical reference talking about the dog getting excited and running, zi makht vayivrakh. All right. Ikh hob—okay. There are many, many ways in Yiddish to tell somebody to go to hell. So in English, when you say go to hell, what are we really saying? It seems like such an innocuous curse, but you're really telling somebody to die. It's a less offensive way of saying drop dead. Right? So go to hell. Well, in Yiddish, there are many, many, many, many ways to say this. One of them is, ikh hob dir tif tayer in der erd. When somebody's really pissing you off or annoying you, I have you deep, tayer, dearly in the ground. I wish you to die right now. Those are my wishes. Deep and dearly departed in the ground. It sounds better in Yiddish. I'm not sure how to translate it. Okay. Here's another one. Ikh hob dir in Loybitsh. I have you in Loybitsh. So Loybitsh is a Yiddish pronunciation of a Polish town. And I've heard two explanations for why this is a form of saying go to hell. Loybitsh was either well known for making coffins, or it may have been, like, a smaller place in a more rural area. So to say that I have you in Loybitsh means you're living in some place in Appalachia, right? It's unimportant, it's so isolated. Or it could mean go to hell, die. Because that's where they made the coffins. I want you in the place where they make the coffins. Okay. When my parents would get upset with me, they had different expressions. My father would frequently tell me zol makhn fun dir a wiatrak. So they frequently would combine Polish and Yiddish. So wiatrak is a windmill in Polish. So my father was telling me he was going to fuck me up so bad that I was going to end up looking like a windmill. Now when you think about this, what was Don Quixote fighting against? He was tilting against the windmills, right? Or he would say, ikh vil makhn fun dir a wiedźma. A wiedźma is a witch or a harridan or a hag. He was going to, you know, beat me up so badly that I was going to end up looking like that.

Okay, let's go further. Er hot zikh tse-sowa-t. When I was younger, I was not good about taking haircuts. I'm somewhat better because my wife lovingly cuts my hair. But I would not take haircuts and my hair would tend to grow out like this. So as we know from pictures of owls, owls' hair grows out like that. So my mother would always say about me, er hot zikh tse-sowa-t, he became an owl. Sowa in Polish and in Yiddish is an owl. Hair like that. All right. Er khapt on tsen srokas mit eyn vaydl. My parents always accused me of trying to take on too much at once or being scattered. So er khapt on tsen srokas mit eyn vaydl. He catches ten magpies with one tail. Okay. Shtip shtoys kdoysh. This is very funny. In Yiddish, when you pray, there's something called a kaddish. That's part of the prayer and it's several versions of it that are set every time you pray. But when you have a meal, before the meal, you have something called kiddush, which is where you make a blessing over the wine or over the bread or both. Okay, so shtip shtoys k'doysh refers to Jews at an event where there's food: shtip, shove, shtoys, shoving harder, and k'doysh, it means kiddush. So it means getting your way to the food as quick as possible before the kiddush is made. Shtip shtoys k'doysh.

DOUG: Shtip shtoys k'doysh.

SHELDON: Shtip shtoys k'doysh. At least that's the interpretation I heard. Er hot a bayze gvire. My mother used this all the time on me. Bayz in Yiddish means several things, but one of the things it means angry, but it also means obsessive or very intent. So a bayze gvire would mean, like, if I'm just talking and talking and talking and talking and will not stop talking. Er hot a bayze gvire. He just won't shut up. He's got this, like, it's not exactly obsessive, but it just—he has, like, this power to, like, get, like, angry and stay angry for a long time. I'm not sure if I explained that well. Okay. Er zikh zapałkes untsutsindn a fayer. Zapałki in Polish are matches. So when you say er hat zikh zapałkes untsutsindn a fayer, he's looking for matches to start a fire. This is almost self-explanatory. He's looking an excuse to start an argument or start trouble. I would hear this all the time with my father, you know, teenager and all that stuff. Okay. Ikh vel dir derlangen a frosk, es zol gezegen mit der elterbobes. So derlangen a frosk means I'm going to deliver a slap to you and you'll be visiting your great-grandparents. This slap will be so hard, you'll be transported back into time 150 years to meet with your ancestors.

DOUG: That's great.

SHELDON: Er makht zikh keloyodea. Well, you know what this is. Keloyodea in Hebrew, I don't know. So er makht zikh, he's making himself as though he's stupid or he doesn't know. So this might be like, like, when my mother's talking to the dog and the dog's not listening. Zi makht zikh keloyodea. She acts like she doesn't understand. Okay. Es gist zikh fun moyl azoy vi matsevaser. Joyce knows this. We joke about this all the time. Matsevaser, when you make matzoh, the Jewish cracker, the water that you use is basically like not good for anything else. So it's basically useless water except for making the matzoh. I know this sounds kind of strange. So to say somebody es gist fun moyl—it pours out of his mouth like matsevaser. It means what's coming out of your mouth is worthless. It's either narishkeit, nonsensical, or you're just going on and on about something that's not important. And a very similar expression is you don't

even have to say matsevaser: es gist fun moyl. In other words, it's like the words just keep coming out of his mouth unceasingly and shut up already. Right?

DOUG: So Sheldon, these are great. By the way, are these codified anywhere? Like, are these published anywhere?

SHELDON: I'm sure some of them are. There is a website called Yiddish Wit, where this woman has done—the woman who put it together—there's several hundred Yiddish idioms and proverbs and expressions there. And she's gone to all the sources and put out several hundred. Some of these might be there, but I doubt that most of them are because again, some of these have a mix of Polish in them. And I think my parents just—and I—I'm certain in every family where they spoke Yiddish, people always came up with their own puns or funny ways of saying thing. So I—I'm not aware of any kind of formal content.

DOUG: These are really interesting and beautiful too. So, what is your Hebrew name?

SHELDON: Well, it's Sholem Dovid, I was named after my father's father, Sholem Dovid Ben Zvi. And if you want to be religious about it, you would say, Sholem Dovid Ben Zvi Halevi Yamot Sheni. Three times a week, if you're a practicing Jew, when you're in the place where you pray, the synagogue or the shtibl or the shul, they take out the scrolls, the five books of Moses, and they read a different portion every week. And when they read it, there's an order to people being called up to the Torah to not read from the text, but reciting a blessing, and then a person who reads from the script, reads the text from the scroll. So the first person to be called is what's called the Kohanim, the priestly class. The second group are the Levites. And you only know who you are based on your father telling you. It's passed by. So thousands of years, countless generations. I'm a Levi. And let me tell you something. The high holidays, when I had to wash the hands of the Kohanim, because that's one of your jobs, you have to pour water. I hated that. And I thought, why do I have to be a Levi? My father had other names for me, as you might imagine, because I, as a kid, I was stubborn. He would always call me Sholem Akshn. Akshn in Hebrew is stubborn. So whenever I—somebody asked me what my name is, I always say Sholem Akshn. And of course the rabbis in the ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva would have had other names for me, like—like Sholem, his mind is a million miles away from the Talmud, because he's more interested in drawing pictures of the—I was going to school during the height of the Vietnam War, and I was drawing pictures of battles in jungle with tanks. I was less interested in the Talmud, more interested in what's happening in Vietnam.

DOUG: So we're going to be closing here. You're involved with a Yiddish reading circle, right?

SHELDON: Reading group, yeah.

DOUG: Reading group. Can you tell us just a few minutes about that? Like, who is there?

SHELDON: This group was formed in the early 1990s, and I joined, like, in the late 1990s. And we used to meet face-to-face, and then when the pandemic began, and then of course, it

petered out, and then it kind of disappeared. But when the pandemic happened, one of the former members suggested we meet on Zoom. We started meeting on Zoom, and I started organizing the reading material and stuff. So typically, right now, when we're at full house, we have about 11 people. And everyone, of course, is retired. But everyone, pretty much, except for one or two people, comes from a secular background. There are two other people who come from a religious background and are still religious. But we have a woman who's 97 years old and she went to Jewish secular Yiddish schools when she was a kid. And that was the experience of most of the people in the group who are not religious. At some point, they were going to these secular schools. And so we read all kinds of things. Right now, we're reading Enemies: a Love Story that was made into a movie based on Isaac Bashevis Singer's story, Sonim, di Geshikhte fun a Libe. We read and we discuss the text, we discuss the words, and we have an ex-mathematician, we have everyone is over-educated, I would have to say.

DOUG: Sheldon, thank you so much.

SHELDON: No problem.

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