GENEVIEVE: And I had no idea this was not an English word until probably seventh or eighth grade. And I remember going to a girlfriend's house... and, like, saying, Oh, I have makapis, I have to wipe them. And she's looking at me, and she's, like, What are you talking about? It's like makapis. And I just kept saying it, and she was like, That is not a word. I'm, like, Yeah, it is. I just, I had no clue.

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. Our guest today is Genevieve Okada Goldstone. Genevieve is an activist for children in public schools. She was born in LA and grew up in San Diego, where she lives now. Her Portuguese mother was from Hawaii, and her father is from Guam and is mixed Chamorro and Japanese. She has a BA from Berkeley and an MA in the psychology of parenthood from NYU, where she studied children's social-emotional development in New York public schools. I first met Genevieve when she was in a PhD program in psychological anthropology at UCSD, and she was conducting field work in LA, where I live, among Jewish converts of color across denominations. We invited her to this podcast to speak about her own experiences converting to Judaism, especially with a focus on language. Genevieve, welcome to Heritage Words.

GENEVIEVE: Thanks, Sarah.

SARAH: So I want to start with your names. Tell us about your names and what they mean to you.

GENEVIEVE: My American names or my Hebrew name?

SARAH: Both, everything.

GENEVIEVE: Okay. Genevieve is a French name. And I think the only connection to that is I was supposed to be a John when I was born, but I came out a girl, and so my parents didn't have a name and they happened to drive past, or my dad did happen to drive past a St. Genevieve's church somewhere in the valley. I assume it's still there. And they're like, oh, that's kind of like Jonathan, Genevieve, okay. So that's how I got my first name. It's a mouthful. I've given my kids much more normal names because it's a lot to grow up with, though I know that's the trend now. There's pros and cons to it. And I've kept professionally both my maiden name and my married name, which took me a while to even add my married name. I had both of my kids, and then eventually, I was like, OK, I should tag along here. Because I'm proud of the fact that I'm part of this

other family and heritage, and it's very much a Jewish name. But then I also wanted to acknowledge my birth culture and heritage. So I use that so people know right off the bat, like, oh, there's a story there. A French, Japanese, and a Jewish name, like, okay, there's a story there. And I've given both of my children the same middle and last name as myself. So, already from their names, you also know that there's a story.

SARAH: Hmm. And so is Okada from Japanese?

GENEVIEVE: Mm-hm.

SARAH: And is Goldstone changed from Goldstein, Goldshteyn, something like that?

GENEVIEVE: I assume so. I've asked them. They don't seem to know. My husband is from South Africa originally. Grew up in Israel, but from South Africa. So I assume at some point it became anglicized.

SARAH: Okay. So I'm assuming his family was originally from Lithuania?

GENEVIEVE: Mm-hm.

SARAH: Okay. Common in South African Jewish communities. Okay. And what about your Hebrew name?

GENEVIEVE: Shoshana Rivka. Shoshana, because my grandmother, my mom's mom, her name is Rose, and even though it's not the direct translation to Rose, it's not Varda. I just liked the name Shoshana better, and I know it's sort of equivalent to Rose. And then my mother actually picked the name Rivka, my non-Jewish mother who was very much Jewish in a lot of ways. Because my conversion process was a very long one. It took probably 15 years. And by the time I was actually finishing it, it was shortly after the terrorist attack in Mumbai, where the Chabad rabbi and rebbetzin were killed. And the rebbetzin's name was Rivka, and my mom really wanted to honor her. So that's where the Rivka comes from.

SARAH: Mm, that's beautiful. And by the way, my oldest daughter's middle name is Rose, and her Hebrew middle name is Shoshana.

GENEVIEVE: Oh, there you go.

SARAH: So now let's turn to your parents. We said that their ancestry is Portuguese, Japanese, and Chamorro, specifically the Guamanian variety. And I'm assuming that's a common combination in Hawaii.

GENEVIEVE: Right.

SARAH: Tell us which of your ancestors moved to Hawaii, and where did your parents meet?

GENEVIEVE: Both my mom's side of the family, I think, came from Madeira, and maybe one or two generations before my mom. So they were all still speaking Portuguese up until her generation. And we're just part of that wave of Portuguese immigrants that now have a lasting history as part of Hawaiian culture.

SARAH: Madera is an island off the coast of Morocco that is part of Portugal, right?

GENEVIEVE: Yes.

SARAH: And they spoke Portuguese there?

GENEVIEVE: Mm-hm.

SARAH: Okay.

GENEVIEVE: And then my father's side, native Chamorro, except for his father or grandfather. I think his grandfather immigrated from Japan and then married a Chamorro woman and had kids. So there were certain names and words that lingered, like Japanese names and words that lingered in the Chamorro side, but definitely, he became part of the Chamorral culture and family life there.

SARAH: In Guam?

GENEVIEVE: Yeah.

SARAH: Okay. And then where did your parents meet?

GENEVIEVE: They met in Guam.

SARAH: Got it. And then when did they move to LA?

GENEVIEVE: Shortly after they were married. I have an older sister, Naomi, who was born in Guam. And then I was born about 10 years later in Los Angeles.

SARAH: And growing up, what languages did you hear in your home?

GENEVIEVE: Only English, because both of my parents are from that generation, especially in the Guamanian and Hawaii, with the, like, that kind of, at the time, you didn't want your kids—you wanted them to assimilate. So even though they had their native languages, it was all about, like, this is the language that the grandparents speak and gossip in, and they all go inside the house, and then the kids go out to the yard and play. And this is our private time to gossip and talk. So neither one of them learned that. It's my understanding that it was at the time very, very much institutionally discouraged to teach Chamorro. Now there's a resurgence of it in Guam, but that was something that was looked down on, is my understanding. So there wasn't any kind of concerted effort to teach it. So, again, some names for family members or dogs, and words sprinkled in here and there throughout my childhood, but definitely it was English, or for my mom, some pidgin English sometimes.

SARAH: Okay, so let's talk about those words, those heritage words that were passed down the generations to you. Tell us about some of those.

GENEVIEVE: There’s not too, too many. I was trying to, like, come up with a good list, but I remember my first word that I knew was different, is we had a dog when I was little named Shintaru, which is a very, very, just Japanese name, just straight-up Japanese name. And I remember, like, knowing that nobody else had a dog named Shintaru. So that's my first, like, recognition of something different about our family. And then, kind of like in a lot of your other interviews on the podcast, the words that I mostly came up with are for private parts. And it's funny because, in preparing for this, I Googled the words just to make sure, like, is my memory of the definition of it right? I wanted to double-check. And it took me to a Facebook page where there's this Guamanian movement to teach kids the proper names of private parts, so that way if kids have anything unsavory to report, they are using the right words, and we're empowering them. Just like in English. Nowadays it's in vogue to teach kids the proper names of things. So there's no awkwardness about it. So I grew up with the proper names in Chamorro. So, pånket was one of them, and that means vagina. So my mom would always say, Go wash your pånket, right? Or when you're taking a shower, because, girls, it requires a little extra effort for that. So that was always something she emphasized with us.

SARAH: This is not the first time that the word vagina has come up on our podcast.

GENEVIEVE: No, it is not. And then related to that, dågan which means your butt or your tushy, so, like, wipe your dågan, wash your dågan, you know, pinch somebody's dågan, that was something that was said a lot. Then, sort of the cutesy names come in. One of them is chubut, which I think just means, like, chubby or fat. And the thing about Chamorro is there's a lot of Spanish influence in the language. And then just because of the American influence, there's also some just English words kind of sprinkled in. So I'm not sure if chubut is, because I think it does mean chubby, like, if that's just, or cutesy, if that has anything to do with the word chubby, or if it just is by chance. My nickname as a kid was neni goat. So, goat, obviously just regular goat, English word. But neni in Chamorro means cutesy little baby. And from what I could find out, I think it's related to the Spanish, like, *nena*, like, cutesy little girl. So now I get it, why I was always called that. And then the other word that was like super common was makapis. So, you wake up in the morning, you have some yellow stuff in your eye, and then mom would say, like, clean out your makapis, wipe your makapis. And I had no idea this was not an English word until probably seventh or eighth grade. And I remember going to a girlfriend's house, like, I very clearly remember, and spending the night, and, like, saying, Oh, I have makapis, I have to wipe them. And she's looking at me, and she's, like, What are you talking about? It's like makapis. And I just kept saying it, and she was like, That is not a word. I'm, like, Yeah, it is. I just, I had no clue. And then I learned, you know, some people call it sleep or eye gunk or whatever. And then flash forward maybe 20 years later, honestly, I looked it up, and that was also kind of a bastardization of the actual Hawaiian word, which is makapiapia, which means, like, eye dew, or eye moisture, so that my mom made it cutesy, I guess, for us.

SARAH: Oh, that's amazing. So how did you look it up?

GENEVIEVE: I don't remember how I looked it up. I must have been…maybe in preparation for my sister's wedding. She had little Hawaiian phrases put onto candle holders at each table at her wedding. The sister that I'm talking about, I have four, is covered in tattoos that recognize our family heritage. Tattoos are a big part of island culture too. We all still go back to Hawaii or Guam fairly regularly and have family there. So it's still very much a part of our identity and connection.

SARAH: So the heritage words you mentioned are mostly child-directed speech, right? Things you heard as a child from both of your parents, right?

GENEVIEVE: I don't know who said it more, my mom or my dad, but it was definitely the normal words that were always said by both of them. Like, I'm sure I was shocked when I learned the word vagina, that there was another word for it, like, just no idea.

SARAH: Yeah. And I think that's pretty common, especially for private parts, for purposes of euphemism, not using a word from the local language because it sounds too crass. But if you use a word from a different language, it sounds better.

GENEVIEVE: Mm hm.

SARAH: So, I want to ask now about your conversion. Tell us about the process of getting interested in Judaism and converting.

GENEVIEVE: So both sides of my family, vaguely Catholic, not super religious. Grew up in rural San Diego, where our school district was, I think, one of the first to be taken over by Christian conservatives, where they wanted to teach creationism and stop teaching evolution. And, you know, as a teenager, I followed this and I kept thinking, well, wow, okay, I don't have those beliefs where I wanna not learn evolution, but what do I believe? So that set me off on this religious, spiritual journey, and I went to church with some friends and explored that. I got really into Buddhism. Buddhism was something I could do alone in my room. And it was calming, but it didn't click. And then I went to Berkeley, and I met a nice Jewish girl from LA, and we were talking one day about spirituality, and she's like, you know, I think you would like Judaism. Come with me to Hillel. And so after class, she just walked me up the hill to the Berkeley Hillel and I remember meeting the rabbi. And I just started learning. And then I had a friend, I lived in the co-ops there, who was Jewish, and he was going to the Orthodox synagogue in Berkeley. And so he started inviting me. So I would go with him on Friday nights, and then we'd always have a place for dinner. And I don't know, it was immediate. It was like, okay, yeah, this is it. It's not about doing something alone in your room. It's about community and connection and a lot of ritual, which the Catholic part of me, like, connected with. And I just, I loved all the people I met, and I really liked the rabbi. And so I started this Orthodox conversion. I didn't know there was anything other than Orthodox Judaism. That was the only thing I was introduced to. And then I found out about Conservative Judaism and Reform Judaism and started exploring that. And Conservative Judaism felt like the closest to Orthodox Judaism. So you could have all of the traditional practice, but then have this egalitarian aspect to it, which had never bothered me. But I did appreciate it as a modern woman, but it, it wasn't the primary thing. It was more of the observance, the traditional prayers, without the same gatekeeping that I felt like the Orthodox were demanding.

SARAH: You ended up converting with which movement?

GENEVIEVE: Conservative. But then I did ask a Reform rabbi to be on my bet din because it felt, like, more inclusive and connected to the larger Jewish community and not just, like, one denomination.

SARAH: Mm-hm. That makes sense. How did you learn the language of Judaism, the Hebrew and Yiddish words that are so common in the English of American Jews?

GENEVIEVE: So, listening to people, so listening at those dinners and services. And it was definitely the Ashkenazi or Yiddish kind of pronunciation where it has the S sound at the end: Shabbos, and good Shabbos. That was the norm at that synagogue at Congregation Beth Israel in Berkeley. And then also my friend, I had one good friend who really was like my mentor. And so I remember very specifically learning, like, Friday night prayers, like blessing over candles or learning the Shema, and, like, just being on the phone with him and he would sound it out and I'd write it and then I'd say it back to him or he'd sing it and then I'd sing it back to him. So I very much had good tutors. I've definitely personally switched over to the Modern Hebrew pronunciation, just in our regular prayers and readings or whatever around the house, because my husband did grow up in Israel, and that's, like, it grates on him to hear the other pronunciation, like, he needs to hear the Modern Hebrew. So I've switched over. So I don't say—I don't say 'good Shabbos,' he would not be happy with that. So everything is 'Shabbat shalom.' So that's where I've landed now that I've been married, and what my kids are hearing.

SARAH: Does your husband speak English or Hebrew to the kids?

GENEVIEVE: He speaks English because, and this was a big debate slash argument when we first had kids, because what a beautiful thing to be able to have your kids be bilingual. However, because he is South African, his mother tongue is English, right? So all of the cutesy things that he, when he holds a baby, he wants to say it in English because that's what he heard. So, for him, it just felt very unnatural to speak Hebrew to a baby. He's fine, you know, having discussions about medicine or politics or whatever in Hebrew, but when it comes to a baby, it's English or honestly, one of the native South African languages. So, like, I know some, like, songs that, like, I'm sure the nannies sang to his mom and to him as a baby because that's what I heard my husband and his mom sing when they came into our house. So, thula thul, thula sana, whatever. So there's like, I know those songs.

SARAH: Okay, wow, that's so interesting.

GENEVIEVE: Yeah.

SARAH: Does he speak with a South African accent?

GENEVIEVE: Nope, he sounds American. My kids do know a little bit of Hebrew, but they don't hear it enough to be conversational. So just like my parents, my husband and my mother-in-law, when they don't want the kids to know what's going on, they'll speak in Hebrew. That's not going to last for very long because they can pick up enough of the context, but at least they check each other to, like, stop the conversation. They can at least do that in Hebrew.

SARAH: Got it. Okay. Do you use any of your heritage words with your children?

GENEVIEVE: No, I do not. They know my nickname because my sister still uses it, neni goat. Because I took conversion to Judaism very seriously and it's not just a religion, it's also this culture. And while I'm still very proud and connected to my birth culture, it's a diluted cultural influence, right? Cause it's Japanese through the lens of Guam and Hawaii, and Hawaii is already this multi-Asian mixture of things. And my mom is Portuguese white, but I always think of her as Asian because all of the cultural traditions and foods in our house were more Asian-influence, like very much a Hawaiian, very much a Hawaiian multiracial, multi-Asian kind of thing. So I still feel very deeply connected to that. But I'm raising kids who I want to feel fully Jewish. Like whatever awkwardness that I still feel as a Jew of color in Jewish spaces, my kids can mostly pass as not having any Asian in them. You kind of have to know to see it. Not that it would matter, but whatever I could to help really just reinforce their Jewish identity, that's what I've chosen to do. And as the mom, like, I'm with them more, I have more control over those words. So I definitely have used more Hebrew with my kids than my husband even has. So my kids know all of the cutesy Hebrew words, like chamud or chamudi or my tinok or tinok sheli, right? So like, they know all that stuff from me, not because my husband says it. So I've tried to, like, where I can, like, sprinkle that in so some part of Hebrew language, like, resonates with them as a mother tongue. So even though I do not speak it fluently, I want them to feel that connection, and I felt the responsibility of giving it to them because it wasn't gonna come from anywhere else.

SARAH: So it sounds like you intentionally replaced the heritage words that you grew up with, the child-directed speech, with words from Hebrew.

GENEVIEVE: Yes.

SARAH: How did you learn which words to use in that way? Had you heard other people speaking to children in Hebrew?

GENEVIEVE: I mean, I studied Hebrew, so I knew some of the words, but just, yeah, just hearing it, asking my husband a lot of questions.

SARAH: Can you tell us about how your experience with conversion compared to those of the people that you studied for your research?

GENEVIEVE: Most of the people that I interviewed got connected to Judaism primarily through a partner. Well, there's some caveats there. Within the Latino Hispanic community, not so much. That was more of a family thing, a community thing. But for African-Americans, for the Asians, for the white converts, a good portion were because of a romantic partner. Conversion was never a forced thing. People always think, like, Oh, you just converted for somebody. No, you don't just convert for somebody, there's too much work involved to do that. But it's your introduction. So my introduction was not through any kind of romantic partner, so I'd say that's a bigger difference.

SARAH: And then what about with regard to language? Do you feel that the way that you learned Hebrew words and blessings and prayers was similar to how other people you studied learned those words and prayers?

GENEVIEVE: Probably, because you learn from community. You learn from your in-laws, right? The people that you're around and having Shabbat dinner with and you learn to recite the blessings over the candles and the wine from the mother-in-law or your future mother-in-law there with you. So I think, yeah, that personal connection, the community that you are in. Most of the people that I interviewed did not take Hebrew as just a regular language course. They did their conversion courses and then just kind of learn the prayers and, like, required Hebrew along the way.

SARAH: Did you ever take an official class to prepare for conversion?

GENEVIEVE: I think I probably did. I think there might have been a small class at the synagogue. But I think that the reason why it's not standing out to me is because my background was in Orthodox Judaism. And I'd already learned to keep kosher, I'd learned to toivel dishes. I had a very deep knowledge and practice and I'd already been to Israel and I'd already read lots of books and was immersed enough in the community and the culture that taking the class was like Judaism-lite because it didn't teach the prayers, because you have to go to services all the time and learn the prayers. Yeah, it was probably an 18-course class, I'm assuming, because most of them are outside of the orthodox. So it wasn't the thing that solidified it for sure.

SARAH: Yeah. Well, I wonder if in the conversion classes that the people you researched participated in, if they covered language. I mean, you mentioned you learned to toivel dishes. Even that word, toivel, from Hebrew and Yiddish, is something that you learn through exposure. But I wonder, if some of the classes explicitly teach, here are some words that you're gonna need when you are participating in Jewish communities as part of Jewish English, not teaching the Hebrew language specifically.

GENEVIEVE: Right. I think there was some of that, I think—I mean it's just part of the process of learning that certain words are introduced because it's all foreign, right? If you're coming in with, like, this, like, maybe you've had some Jewish friends, but, like, really learning about Judaism, it's all new, and I'm sure very intimidating. I don't recall, like, a glossary being handed or things like that, though there might've been, or maybe there are now, that would be really fun. That would be fun to ask, actually, like a group of converts to—what are some words that you've learned that are super unusual that didn't come up in your class, or they've come up in conversation? Like that would be a super fun book or, like, booklet to put together.

SARAH: Yes, I love that. What would be some of the words that immediately pop to mind that you would include in that list?

GENEVIEVE: I think something that people should point out if it's not already obvious is if you're in a place where they are doing that S sound instead of the T sound, like, explaining that history. I don't recall that ever being, like, explicitly laid out. And the foods that go along with it, right? So having kugel and cholent in a certain place, but then go to someplace else, and that's all, like, Israeli salads and pita, just even that shows where a community is coming from or what they're emphasizing.

SARAH: So it sounds like you're recommending that intro to Judaism courses or potential conversion courses should cover the diversity of the Jewish world. And especially with regard to language and culture and food and all that.

GENEVIEVE: Yes, absolutely. At least at AJU, I know they had revamped the program. But at the time when I did my research, so 10 years ago, I think it was a very tiny part, like, the Indian Jews and the Chinese Jews, and there's this connection, and Jews are everywhere. But to go into the finer details of it. Yeah, that would be really interesting. And also, then it would make more sense why you're seeing this, like—because I grew up in the 80s and 90s, with a certain idea of what Jewish, American Jewish was. And it was very much influenced by Hollywood, where it was very much this Yiddish Ashkenazi influence. And I had no clue about Sephardic, Mizrahi Jews or that world, and yeah, I mean, you get more of it in LA, you feel it more. So maybe people are more

in tune, but if you're just kind of paying attention to popular culture, popular culture really only shows that type of Judaism. So emphasizing that there's these other types that are equally beautiful and with their own deep traditions that are very different would be amazing.

SARAH: I think we have a lot of work to do in changing the cultural norms, and Hollywood cultural products can also change, right? But also changing intro to Judaism classes. And the Jewish English Lexicon, which the Jewish Language Project runs, has a list of words—it's a crowdsourced dictionary of words from Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and many other languages that Jews use while speaking English. And there are definitions and recordings. And when we added the recordings, we were specifically thinking of people converting to Judaism and Jew-adjacent non-Jews. And that was supposed to be—and is—a good way for them to learn the language of the community. But each word has multiple pronunciations and spellings, like we would have Shabbat and Shabbos, and so people need to learn how to figure out which one they want to use.

GENEVIEVE: That's amazing. I didn't realize that you had that. That's awesome.

SARAH: Yeah. Okay. We're almost out of time. I just want to leave the last question open to you for any other thoughts you have about ancestry, language, identity, community, conversion, or anything we've talked about.

GENEVIEVE: In preparing to speak with you, I was like, Oh, I don't know if I have enough. And I realize it's because, like I mentioned, I've really de-emphasized my own background to underscore my husband’s slash the Jewish side, because it's not, again, it's not just a religion, it's also this culture, this heritage, this peoplehood, and I just want my kids to feel fully confident in that identity. And not that they don't know that mama's Asian. They know that about themselves. So, for like example, on Shabbat dinner, instead of having a course of gefilte fish, we always have sushi. So that's like our little tradition. So that’s something I do to try to just underscore my background. But it's obviously really watered down compared to what I grew up with. So I was just thinking, I am an example of how, like, one day, my kids will, unless they marry other multiracial Jews, I'll be forgotten. My background will just be this interesting side note that somebody one day does on Ancestry.com, like, finds out, Oh, you had this mixed-race Jewish ancestor. I feel like I'm part of that disappearance, maybe. So that kind of made me feel uncomfortable. So, yeah, maybe I need to do more of even just sharing those few words, words for private parts with my kids, maybe that's something I can pass on. And we do eat the food, we do go visit places, we do talk about family stories, but I was thinking it's definitely not what has been my main focus. And I don't know if that says

something about my own insecurity of my own Jewish identity, my own worries about their potential insecurity about their Jewish identities. I have to think on that more. But yeah, now I've got to ask other converts how they're doing it because I wonder if I'm more like some others or if other people are bringing their backgrounds in more than I am. Like, their specifically non-Jewish backgrounds. It's one thing to bring in another Jewish culture and merge the two, but to bring in something that's very clearly coded as not Jewish. Yeah, how people are managing that and thinking through it.

SARAH: Well, also in this season of Heritage Words, we will be interviewing Michael Twitty, an African-American Jew, and he talks about that. And hopefully, we'll have other interviews with other people who have converted or have multiple Jewish heritages, and so we will see. We'll see how they're doing it.

GENEVIEVE: Looking forward to it. That's awesome.

SARAH: Yeah, Genevieve, thank you so much for these wonderful conversations, and we look forward to seeing how you and your family's identities develop.

GENEVIEVE: Thank you. Thanks for asking me to be part of this.

SARAH: Heritage Words is a partnership of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Language Project and HUC Connect, supported by tax-deductible donations from listeners like you. I'm the producer and host, Sarah Bunin Benor. Kyle Elbaz Fingerhut is assistant producer, Avishay Artsy is editor, and Talia Ehrenberg is video editor. The music is from Maurice El Medioni's French and Algerian Arabic album "Cafe Oran," featuring the Klezmatics' David Krakauer and Frank London, courtesy of Pirana Records. This podcast is one of the many ways the Jewish Language Project raises awareness about the diversity of the Jewish people and the phenomenon of heritage words. We also have online crowdsourced dictionaries where you can find the words mentioned on the podcast. We post Jewish word of the week and fun facts on social media, and we offer free educational materials and exhibits that you can visit online or display in a synagogue, museum, or community center. Contact us about our live taping opportunities. Looking for gifts for Shabbat dinners and Passover Seders? Check out our whimsical, multilingual T-shirts, tote bags, stickers, and aprons. You can find all this content and donate, volunteer, or sign up for our email list at jewishlanguages.org. Thank you, mersi muncho, soghboshi, rahmat, shukran, todah rabah, a sheynem dank.