RAPHAEL: There's an early scene where Jen is washing a dish, and she's using the fleyshig sponge, and Lisa says, ‘Ah, that’s the flayshig sponge.’ And I go, ‘I think it’s fleyshig.’ And Lisa goes, ‘I'm pretty sure it's flayshig’... And so I called my mom… and I said, ‘is it fleyshig or flayshig?’ My mom says, ‘Well, that depends. Are you a Litvak or a Galizianer?’ And I go, ‘Okay, we're getting too deep in the weeds now.’

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 Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Raphael is a TV writer and producer known for his creativity and brilliance. He is the creator of BoJack Horseman and the new show, Long Story Short, which premiered this summer on Netflix. He co-created Undone with Kate Purdy and served as executive producer on Lisa Hanawalt’s Tuca & Bertie. He also wrote a book of short stories, Someone Who Will Love You in All Your Damaged Glory. Raphael grew up in a Jewishly engaged family in the Bay Area, which is also the focus of Long Story Short. Since that show came out a few months ago, the Jewish community has been abuzz, with some calling it the most Jewishly-specific show ever. You can hear another interview with Raphael about the show on The Bagel Report, a wonderful podcast about Jews and pop culture. Raphael, welcome to Heritage Words.

RAPHAEL: Thank you. It's great to be here. What a treat.

SARAH: I wanna start by asking about your ancestors. Where were they from, and when did they migrate to the US?

RAPHAEL: My ancestors are from Eastern Europe. You know, I've never done, like, a 23andMe 'cause I don't want anyone else to have my DNA in case I decide I wanna do crimes later. But I'm pretty confident I would get like 2000% Ashkenazi Jewish. Both my parents did it, and that's what they got, I think with maybe a smattering of Neanderthal as well. So if we're going way back, I think there is a little bit of Neanderthal in me. Unrelated to the Jewish side. All four of my grandparents were born in America. Three out of the four were the children of immigrants who had recently come to America. I think my paternal grandfather was just barely born in America, and my maternal grandfather, his parents were Americans as well, but I think their parents came over from Europe. On my mom's side, they're Lithuanians. On my dad's side, more kind of Polish, so I got a little bit of Litvak and a little bit of Galizianer in me if we're really zooming in on the, on the diversity of my sameness. I come from a mixed marriage in that regard, and, you know, my father grew up in Connecticut, his parents were real, real–what you think of when you think of New York Jews. My mother grew up in Minnesota and California, and then I grew up in Northern California as well. So I feel like when I think of, like, what kind of Jewish I am, I really see myself as, like, American Jewish more than anything else. If I had a conversation with Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof, we wouldn't have that much in common as far as what we think of as Jewishness. But there is a thread there. There is some stuff that connects us.

SARAH: And you and Tevye might not be able to communicate so well since he spoke Yiddish.

RAPHAEL: Well, in Fiddler on the Roof, he spoke English, so.

SARAH: Oh, that's a good point. That's a good point. So did you ever learn any Yiddish?

RAPHAEL: No, I mean, not in any real way. Like, you pick it up. You know, I know a handful of of Yiddish words. I can't conjugate a Yiddish verb. But I know the Yiddish that is a part of the American Jewish vernacular and, in some sense, is part of the larger American vernacular because of the melting pot that is America. I mean, I was actually, I was just talking to my mother about it in preparation for this interview. And I said, you know, I feel like, what I got from Yiddish was less from the specifics of my family and more from like, Mad Magazine, Mel Brooks, you know, the pop culture that I was, you know, devouring, you know, I was really into comedy as a kid. I still am. And I felt like a lot of the comedy I was drawn to, possibly because I am Jewish, was Jewish, and I would see the Jewishness in it, right? You have, you know, Groucho Marx performing for a large audience, 'Hooray for Captain Spaulding, the African Explorer. Did someone call me schnorrer?' You know? Or Laverne & Shirley, 'schlemiel and schlimazel.' I feel like Yiddish was everywhere, and it felt like a special code that I was on the inside of, even though it wasn't, like, bandied about in my household.

SARAH: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And it aligns with the show. The show has a lot of Yiddish words. We'll get back to that in a minute. But first, let me ask you about your names: Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Tell us about that.

RAPHAEL: Okay, well, I guess we'll go in order. Raphael is my first name. I was named after my great-grandmother, Rosie or Raizel. So they went Raifel for that. My middle name is Matthew, I was named after my great-grandfather, Max. So, you know, very much keeping in the tradition of naming the children after the departed ancestors. I have a hyphenated last name which I think perhaps reflects my egalitarian Bay Area eighties kind of upbringing. It was the thing at the time. My mother's last name is Bob. My father's last name is Waksberg. Bob is, I believe, Lithuanian for bean. Not sure why that was my family's name. There's another theory that an ancestor of mine was involved in B'nai B'rith, so bet-bet, Bob became the last name. But we are pretty confident that it was not shortened at Ellis Island, that it was Bob in the old country. Waksberg, I believe, means 'growing mountain.' Also don't know what that's about, but that's the combination of those two names, is my name.

SARAH: Yeah, I would guess that both Bob and Waksberg are ornamental names, which is a type of last name in Ashkenazi communities that isn't based on profession or location or anything like that. It's just, it sounded cool. So yes, bob actually does mean bean, it's, you know, the word bupkis comes from that 'cause-

RAPHAEL: Oh!

SARAH: Yeah, 'cause bupkis is like little beans and, also goat turds, which is, it means, 'What am I? Goat turd?' So like, 'What am I bupkis?'

RAPHAEL: Got it. I'll take that back with me. That's good information.

SARAH: And so you go by Raphael, and that's your Hebrew name as well.

RAPHAEL: Yes. Raphael Menachem.

SARAH: Okay. So Menachem is your middle name in Hebrew. Yes—I also wanna ask you about the names and the language in the show, but first I wanna hear about your creative process, specifically for Long Story Short. Did you write an initial draft of the script for each episode, or did you come to the writers with more general ideas?

RAPHAEL: So, for the first season of the show, because I had to develop it a little bit on my own before we hired a writing staff, I did kind of arc out the season, and I had ideas for what I thought the broad stories would be for every individual episode. But then, you know, we hired a room full of writers, and we really got into each episode together, and each writer did write their own episode with collaboration from the group and everybody. But it really was a group project, which I would say I was, you know, the captain of the ship, but I was not the sole creative voice, by any means. And I think in putting that room together, it was important to me to have a diverse group of viewpoints in all meanings of the word diverse and to kind of represent the diversity of the show and not feel like it has one voice and is just saying one thing, or it just has one relationship with Jewish culture or American culture or anything else.

SARAH: Yeah. So what percentage of the writers were Jewish?

RAPHAEL: About half.

SARAH: Mm-hmm.

RAPHAEL: And even then, I mean, it was enlightening for me to kind of feel the difference of the Jews and with the actors as well. We had a lot of Jewish actors who'd come in going, 'How do I pronounce this word?' Or 'What does this mean?' Or, 'Oh, that's not how my family did it.' Growing up, we often feel like the way we are raised is the universal way that things are, especially if you are of a minority or in a, you know, smaller community within a community, you go, okay, well, this is how we do it, and so, you know, going out into the world and meeting other Jews who have different experiences has really been enlightening for me and interesting.

SARAH: That reminds me of a scene in one of the later episodes of season one, where one of the characters says, 'There's not one right way to be Jewish.' And another character responds something like—well, you tell us. How does she respond?

RAPHAEL: What does she say? She says, 'But there is a progressive, egalitarian, conservative Judaism with an emphasis on ritual and community over faith and blind practice. That's literally the only way it makes sense.'

SARAH: Exactly.

RAPHAEL: And that is her opinion.

SARAH: Exactly. And so that's like what you were saying, you get used to a particular type of Jewishness.

RAPHAEL: Right.

SARAH: On the Bagel Report, when you were interviewed, you said that when you saw Transparent, another show, that you responded, ‘I didn't know a show was allowed to be this Jewish.’ That you felt like it didn't need to explain things, and I'm also a big fan of Transparent, and I've also written articles about it. And I think Long Story Short has surpassed Transparent—

RAPHAEL: Oh, wow!

SARAH: As the most Jewishly specific show aside from shows about Orthodox Jews.

RAPHAEL: Right.

SARAH: And do you agree?

RAPHAEL: Well, I don't want to put myself in competition with other shows. I think that is open to the eye of the beholder, and I would also say that as we've been discussing, what Jewish means, means something different to everybody. Right? So there are shows that you might say are more or less Jewish, whether they conform to your version of what Judaism is, right? Like, I think there are people who probably say that Seinfeld is the most Jewish show there could ever be or would be, and that just because another show spends more time in a synagogue doesn't make it more Jewish than Seinfeld in its sensibilities, right? There are lots of ways to define that, and so I am very glad to hear that this show is resonating with Jews on a different register than other shows that have done it before. I think that was certainly, you know, one of the intentions behind the show, is that there's a specificity to it and to its representation, and a lack of reticence or shyness in the way that we show these Jewish characters that I felt like I had not seen before quite in this way. And I feel like people are taking it in that spirit, which is wonderful. But I say that not to denigrate the purported Jewishness of other Jewish media.

SARAH: Oh, yes. I did not mean to put them in competition, but yeah. And I think that's one reason that this show resonates so much with my circles, because I am in that progressive, egalitarian world where tradition is important, you know? And so people keep asking me, ‘Have you seen Long Story Short?’ And, yeah, it's a big deal in my circles.

RAPHAEL: Well, good, I'm glad.

SARAH: Yeah. And I think so much about the show makes it feel Jewish, like the home decor, the holidays, lifecycle celebrations, and commemorations. And there's an episode about a JCC gala honoring one of the characters. But I would say that language plays an important role in that sense of this show as very Jewish. And so first, how much of the language in Long Story Short is based on language in your family?

RAPHAEL: Some, you know, and again, I would say, my understanding of my family's vernacular is also mixed up with pop culture, you know, that I've accumulated over the years of what I think being Jewish is, right? And so there's some things where I'm like, wait, did that come from my grandmother or did that come from, you know, Dick van Dyke's mother in Bye Bye Birdie? I'm not quite sure. But I think there are certain things that feel very Jewish to me and very familiar to me. You know, one is the way they talk to each other and talk over each other. Right? And you would know the term for this is, like, cooperative collaboration or collaborative—something like that—conversation, which you might otherwise just call interrupting.

SARAH: Yes.

RAPHAEL: But this idea—

SARAH: Oh, oh, there you go. I just interrupted you. But really, it's not interrupting, it's overlapping, right? It’s not like-

RAPHAEL: Right, like, ‘I know what you’re going to say. You don't need to finish the sentence, 'cause I get what you're saying and I'm already responding to it, but you can still finish. That's fine. I'm not, you know, cutting you off. I'm just, let's let this conversation go faster,’ right? And so there's a lot of that on the show. A lot of people talking over each other, talking at once, because that, to me, feels, I'll say, real, and whether that's Jewish or not, I guess is open to interpretation. I also grew up in a family full of people with ADD. So that was also very much coloring my perspective of how people talk to each other.

SARAH: Yeah. So did you write that into the script? The overlapping?

RAPHAEL: Yes. It's very consciously written, there's a lot of like dual dialogue in the script. And then also, because we are in animation, all of our actors record separately, so we can really be very specific with the timing of how they overlap with each other. So our editors also are really good. Like, there’ll come times in the edit where they'll go, ‘I'm gonna move this line up a little bit because we get the gist of it,’ and we can kind of add overlaps and kind of go, no, no, I can't hear it at all, let's take out some of the overlaps. We can be really, like, specific about it, and hyper-tuned into, like, what we want our audience to hear when and which character we want them to be focusing on, even as other people are talking.

SARAH: Oh, that's really interesting.

RAPHAEL: But I don’t know if you could do it in live action, like it would be very difficult.

SARAH: Yeah, that's true. And so that's why it's so fast-paced, because—

RAPHAEL: Yeah.

SARAH: They were recorded separately, but overlapped on purpose. That's really interesting. Okay, so another aspect of the language is the use of Yiddish words.

RAPHAEL: Mm-hm.

SARAH: Some of them are used by characters in the older generations, like Naomi's parents in the 1950s New York scene, and by Naomi and Elliot, the parents' generation. But the children's generation also uses some Yiddish words like Avi saying ‘oy vey’ when he is talking to Shira about how hard it is to be Jewish. And then Shira responds, ‘Judaism is a lot of tsures.’

RAPHAEL: Yes.

SARAH: And is that something you would've said in your family? You—and I'm—I know these characters aren't representing your siblings, but-

RAPHAEL: I dunno if I would've used the phrase, ‘Judaism is a lot of tsures,’ but tsures is definitely a word that I use quite a bit. It feels very helpful in everyday life. ‘It’s a lot of tsures.’ ‘I need the tsures?’ Like, ‘I don't need that tsures.’ That is helpful. And also I think when you're talking about Judaism, the Yiddish kind of creeps back in, like, it feels appropriate, right? I think another big word is chutzpah. I feel like there's no really good English—you know, it's kind of audacity or nerve, but I feel like it's very versatile, 'cause it can be both a good thing, like, you know, ‘I'll say one thing for the kid, he's got chutzpah,’ but it can also be like, ‘Oh, the chutzpah on that guy.’ And so that's really helpful. I mean, this is very basic, but I feel like gesundheit is, you know, the only appropriate way to respond to a sneeze. Like, ‘God bless you,’ feels like, ‘Oh, God bless you.’ Like, it's so gentle and kind of religious, and gesundheit feels like it's a sneeze. It's a response. It's like, ‘Yeah, right back at you, gesundheit.’ I think ‘nu’ is another Yiddishism. I think it's a Yiddishism. I don't know what that is if it's not a Yiddishism.

SARAH: Yeah, it is.

RAPHAEL: But it's not English. And it's funny, like, in context, like, writing this show, where I have to explain some of these things to non-Jews, and I realize, I don't know how, like, what is nu? It’s nu! Like how- It’s a thing you say at the end of a sentence, or before a sentence, or instead of a sentence? It's all-purpose. I don't know how to describe it. You just put it in. Or, like, another thing I noticed that I was having my characters do, which I don't know if it's Jewish, it might be New York, is the construction, ‘you want I should.’ Like, you know, ‘You want I should leave out some cake for you if you're coming in late.’ ‘You want I should.’ And our, our script coordinator would flag it, like, ‘Is this correct?’ And I go, ‘No, no. That's right. Yeah, that’s—’ ‘I

think you’re missing a word here.’ ‘No, no. You want I should. What? So you want I should starve? Like, you want I should.’ It feels very specific to me.

SARAH: Yeah. And some of the words that you just said are in the show, but some I don't remember being in the show. Like, I don't think gesundheit shows up and,

RAPHAEL: Oh, probably not. Yeah.

SARAH: Yeah. And, I'm not sure about—

RAPHAEL: Well, no one, no one sneezes on the show 'cause it's all scripted.

SARAH: Oh, that’s true! Well, maybe in season two.

RAPHAEL: There’s never an opportunity. Unless you're making a whole point out of it, somebody sneezing and somebody else saying gesundheit.

SARAH: That's a good point. Yeah.

RAPHAEL You wouldn't use it, but yeah. Yeah, definitely, I wanna get to—ungepatchke I wanted to get in there. That's a favorite of mine. And also very, very helpful when describing the houses in both Southern and Northern California. Sometimes they're a little ungepatchke.

SARAH: Totally. Totally. Well, okay. I'm just gonna tell listeners some of the other types of words that are in the show. So, some are words that most Americans would recognize, like mazel tov, kosher, chutzpah, schmooze, putz, and schmear. But the show also includes many Yiddish heritage words that are not common outside of Ashkenazi Jewish communities. In fact, Hey Alma ran an article in September 2025: all the Yiddish words in Long Story Short season one, with the sub headline: from schmendrik to schnook, this Netflix show contains a wealth of the mama-loshn.

RAPHAEL: I, you know, I saw that article and I was surprised at how many there were. I didn't realize we had put in quite that much Yiddish into the show.

SARAH: Yeah and—

RAPHAEL: Yeah, I think it's, like, almost every episode.

SARAH: Yeah. Oh, yeah. And just to give a little understanding of the types of words—so on Heritage Words, this podcast, we talk about heritage words in many semantic domains, that is, in areas of meaning, and all of those are represented in Long Story Short. So there are food words like kugel, kichel, knish, babke, schmaltz, and challah. Kinship terms like bubbie. Terms of endearment and positive evaluation like bubbeleh and kvell. Terms of negative evaluation like kvetch, vilde chaye, nudnik, nudge, and schnuk. Oh, there's a lot more actually. Schlimazel,

schlep, feh, nu, oy vey, oy gevalt, tsuris, farkakte, farshtunkene, mishegoss. Okay. And then body parts like tuches and shmeckel and words in the religious domain like Shabbos, hechsher, fleyshik, shul, shiva, and bris, and cultural specific terms that are not about religion, like shtetl, pogrom, and goyim, and then just other random words like shtick and ungepatchke. So, when you use these words, do you and the writers discuss concerns about much of the audience not understanding these words?

RAPHAEL: No. Maybe we should. I don't know. I mean, I think all that stuff, I think you get it in context. I mean, there are a few lines where I'm, like, ‘Oh yeah, this is just gonna go over people's heads,’ and that's okay. Like, I, you know, the example I always point to is my previous show, BoJack Horseman, which is a Hollywood satire. And, you know, we'd throw out things about, like, the differences between an agent and a manager and points on the back end and references to obscure celebrities and, like, you know, really inside Hollywood stuff. And people were able to connect to it because, you know, either you're interested in that stuff or you're not, but it goes right past you. And you connect to the more universal themes and relationships and characters. And I think we've always thought about this show as being universal in its stories but specific in its storytelling. You know, I'm a big believer that you find the universal through specifics. You know, there's a famous story, which I like to tell all the time—I'm sure you've heard this before, too—of Fiddler on the Roof being such a big hit in America that they went on a world tour. And there's a story that Sheldon Harnick tells about, you know, being in the lobby at the premier in Japan, kind of, you know, nervously ripping his program into pieces, going, ‘What are we doing in Japan? There's no Jews here. They're not gonna understand any of this stuff. Why do we think this is a good idea? We're gonna lose so much money or be the laughing stock of the theater community.’ And then he hears this rapturous applause, and people are streaming out in the lobby, so excited. Someone comes up to him and says, ‘I gotta tell you, I don't know how this show made sense anywhere but Japan, this is the quintessential Japanese story. It's all about parents and children and tradition and letting go and modernity and how to kind of hold these ideas in your head simultaneously.’
And obviously, you know, you kind of forget about those universal themes when you're watching it, but they wash over you. I think that was my approach here as well, is that, like, let's put the specifics in, let's make it feel specific and real, and not compromise that, and that audiences will find their own way in.

SARAH: Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense. And you're right, there are some lines that will kind of go over people's head. Like, when Naomi says, ‘We're gonna be late—we're gonna miss mashiach.’

RAPHAEL: Yes. I was thinking the same thing, like, that's an early line of, like, oh, some people will just have no idea what she's talking about and not even realize that it is a joke.
They're gonna think, ‘Oh, we're gonna miss, you know, with this traffic, we're gonna miss the mashiach’ is the line. And if you don't know what mashiach is, you think, ‘Oh, they're gonna miss something 'cause of the traffic.’

SARAH: Yeah.

RAPHAEL: But if you get it, then it feels like it's an extra little thing just for you. The same way when I was reading Mad Magazine or watching Mel Brooks movies, I felt like these things are just for me. Like, I think that's good.

SARAH: Yeah. I'm glad you brought up Mad Magazine and you mentioned before the Marx Brothers, and I think that is how Yiddish came to be seen as an important language in comedy, was shows and magazines like that. And also, that's how a lot of people learned a lot of the Yiddish words and how a lot of the Yiddish words that are still used in Jewish communities were maintained partly through that pop culture. And so I think your show may play that role in the 2020s.

RAPHAEL: Wouldn't that be lovely?

SARAH: Okay. I wanna ask you about the interplay between the writers and the actors…

RAPHAEL: Sure.

SARAH: …and how it relates to the language. So, I watched a panel with you and the actors in the show, and Lisa Edelstein said that it was her idea to make Naomi Schwartz from New York, and then you asked the writers to add a backstory about that. Tell us about that.

RAPHAEL: Although I think the way she describes it is not that it was her idea, it was that, well, obviously Naomi was from New York, and I was wrong to ever not think that, you know? She doesn't claim to have come up with the idea, she just claims that, like, she, you know, she intuited she felt the character. You know, I think that the voice she's doing—is not entirely, but I think, very much—based on her own mother's voice, and I found that a lot with some of the actors that we hired. Like, in some of our flashback scenes, we have like David Krumholtz playing Naomi's father, and I said, you know, ‘I want like a mid-century East Coast Jew.’ And he goes, ‘Well, my dad's a mid-century East Coast Jew, so I'm gonna do his voice.’ And so I think for a lot of actors, this was a cool opportunity and way for them to kind of, like, play with this stuff that they were raised with or got, and that, yeah, their choices informed the writing of the characters. And that's always true. That, like, you have an idea, but then the actor comes in and they do something in a certain way or they get laughs in a certain direction. You go, ‘Oh, that's interesting. Let's keep playing with that.’ Or like, ‘Ooh, that, that's a fun dynamic. Let’s do more there.’ So it is really helpful to have these actors that have their own experiences with this stuff, right? I remember, there's an early scene where Jen is washing a dish, and she's using the fleyshig sponge, and Lisa says, ‘Akh, that’s the flayshig sponge.’ And I go, ‘I think it’s fleyshig.’ And Lisa goes, ‘I'm pretty sure it's flayshig.’ And I actually had to plead ignorance because I grew up vegetarian, so we didn't have fleyshig dishes. I was like, I thought it was fleyshig. And so I called my mom, who was, you know—I guess my mom and my dad were my experts when it comes to this. And I said, ‘Is it fleyshig or flayshig?’ My mom says, ‘Well, that depends. Are you a Litvak or a Galizianer?’ And I go, ‘Okay, we're getting too deep in the weeds now,’ but, like, I'm learning stuff, you know, because of the experience of writing the show. Like, I don't see

myself as, like, the expert that's just, you know, telling the world how it is about this Jewish family. Like, I'm—through the conversations with my other writers and with my actors, like, I'm finding things out and I'm uncovering things. So, it's been really fun for me in that way to engage with this area of my life that I never have in my work before.

SARAH: Mm. Yeah. Let's play a clip of Lisa Edelstein's brilliant portrayal of Naomi.

CLIP: 'I just thought the phone would be a way to see Hannah once in a while.' 'I know, Mom.' 'I'm not complaining, but I never see her, and it feels like you're punishing me.' 'I'm not—' 'I can't imagine, but I'm sure I deserve it. It's your perspective, I'm not complaining.' 'Dad—' 'Is it true? Are we terrible grandparents ruining Hannah's life?' 'Yeah, I'm gonna go call the hot tub manufacturer.'

SARAH: So that was a scene with Avi and Naomi, and you can hear the New York accent, and you can hear the overlapping that we were talking about before. And you can also hear her stereotypical Jewish mother content. That—the way she's talking about her granddaughter and talking to her son, is this overbearing, stereotypical New York Jewish mother approach. And I'm wondering what you think about that, if this is an intentional approach.

RAPHAEL: Well, I might say archetypical, not stereotypical, but I understand what you're saying, and I think it was important to me to—rather than run away from some of these stereotypes, to try to dimensionalize them because I felt like there was some truth to this portrayal that we've seen before and seen perhaps done broadly or offensively. And it obviously doesn't speak for all Jewish mothers or all Jewish women, but there is a strain of it that I recognize that I wanted to portray in maybe a more sympathetic light than what I'd seen before. And so I think, you know, in, in isolation, some of these scenes might feel abrasive or might feel like, 'Oh, did he have to go there or do that?' But I would hope by watching the season and the context of it, that you would come to love this character and appreciate her. And I think a lot of that is Lisa's performance, who I think has such an empathetic view of this character and plays her so truly. And you do feel how much she loves and wants to be loved. And she's a very flawed character, but she's not by any means a villain or a flat character.

SARAH: Yeah, that makes sense. And later in the season, there is sort of a redemption arc, that I won't give away too much. I wanna play another scene, and this is about imitating older relatives, and there's this idea of a familect, which is a family dialect and that can include heritage words that were passed down the generations in that family.

RAPHAEL: Yeah.

SARAH: And also inside jokes. And this scene highlights an inside joke that is a recurring theme throughout the season. And then in the final episode of the season, is- we get the origin story of it in a beautiful, beautiful scene. So here is that clip.

CLIP: ‘Look at him sucking up the oxygen like this weekend is for him.’ ‘Is not a shnook entitled to a little schmooze at his great nephew’s simcha?’ ‘You laugh, but a shnook is entitled.’ ‘I’m just glad cousin Moishe’s not here.’ ‘Well, the night is young.’

SARAH: So, tell us about the shnook inside joke.

RAPHAEL: Yeah, it's funny. There’s a few things going on in that clip, which was a bit of a gamble for us, but I think paid off is, you know, they do, the shnook is entitled bit, and they also reference cousin Moishe, which is also setting up a thing that we learn about much later in the season. And I think the kunts of the show here, if I may use that word, kunts, is that we're jumping around in time. I don't think we've explained that in this conversation. That we're getting to see this family over many years, going backwards and forwards. And I think some of the fear in making a show like that is you don't wanna do stuff that is setting stuff up for later reveals but is not enjoyable in the moment, or just feels like, okay, there's a bunch of questions like, what does that mean? What does that mean? I guess we'll find out later. And so it was really important to me that, while nesting in these little mysteries and reveals, that it doesn't take away from the enjoyment the first time around. And so one thing I was delighted to see was that this shnook is entitled bit that they're doing, I think does get a laugh on first viewing, even if you don't know what they're talking about. I mean, you wouldn't know what they're talking about. But it's clear they're making fun of their great uncle, and they're doing a voice, and they're doing some bit, and it’s not presented like it's a great mystery to be solved. And then this bit kind of recurs over the course of the season. And that, yes, in the finale, we see the origin of this bit, but we haven't presented it like it was a mystery that needed to be solved. So, I think it feels rewarding when you get the reveal, but structurally, you're not frustrated in the meantime. And that was really important to me. And this comes from what I also think is universal, not just a Jewish thing, of like, families have inside jokes, families have bits that they do with each other. We have a number of them in my family that would make no sense to anyone outside of our family. And I think the thing I was looking forward to in telling a story about family was getting to introduce stuff like that 'cause that, I think, makes a family feel real. It makes them feel like they have history together and there's a texture there, you know, they aren't just actors meeting for the first time on a sound stage. Like there's stuff there that you, as an audience, are on the outside of. And especially, I think it was helpful in this first episode because we're telling a story of Avi's new girlfriend, Jen, who is very much on the outside of it. She is in a sense the audience surrogate in this way that she's being, you know, especially if you are not Jewish and you're watching the show, you're being brought into this family with all their foreign words and customs and ways that they act around each other. And you are trying to suss out, is this correct? Is this how they're supposed to be? Am I in the wrong here? What's normal and what's strange about all this? And so it was important to me that we have some of those inside jokes and recurring gags that help the family feel like a closed unit.

SARAH: Yeah. And the way they say it, their phonology and their intonation, like, the way they pronounce it, and the their pitch is very much an imitation.

RAPHAEL: Right.

SARAH: It's marked as not their own language. Like, they could have just said ‘is a shnook, not entitled,’ but they say, ‘is a shnook not entitled?’

RAPHAEL: Right.

SARAH: Both of them, both of the actors who play Shira and Avi did that so well. And, and this is actually a common phenomenon for descendants of Yiddish speakers to use Yiddish in this way, that is very quotative.

RAPHAEL: Right. You’re doing a character, you're putting it on. Yeah.

SARAH: Exactly. And so-

RAPHAEL: I mean that feels like a lot, a lot of my early introductions to Yiddish was that. It was, like, a kind of a hyper-aware, like, this is a bit that we're doing, right? You think of—like the Joy of Yiddish or, like, these kind of—I'm imagining these books you would see at like the checkout counter. My mom used to own a Jewish bookstore, and so you'd have these, like, cute little tchotchkes of, like, Yiddishisms, that felt like, ‘Isn't this cute?’ Right? Not treating it like a full language that you would have a conversation in, but these little interjections, these little bits of character. I think for my generation, that feels very true to how we think of Yiddish and what Yiddish is for.

SARAH: Exactly. And then another part of the familect is the wordplay. There's some wordplay in this show, like when Elliot complains about a broken jacuzzi in their vacation rental, he says, ‘They say jacuzzi. I say j’accuse.’ J’accuse.

RAPHAEL: Yes.

SARAH: Was this kind of thing common in your family? Wordplay?

RAPHAEL: I think so. You know, it was funny. I was just thinking about this also, and that I wonder, I mean, I think it's a little bit of a chicken and egg thing, but I do wonder if you find this in cultures that are multilingual, right? Like, there's a joke in the show about the Hebrew word minyan, minyen, with, like, a minion, like someone's minion, like, in Despicable Me minions, right? And that's a parallel that I noticed in, like, second grade, right? And, like, you know, learning Hebrew in school, you learn that, ‘mi’ is ‘who’ and ‘hu’ is ‘he’ and ‘hi’ is ‘she’, and ‘dog’ is ‘fish.’ Right? And kind of the comedy of that, of these words meaning different things, I do think it creates a brain that is well-suited to word play. But also, that might just be, this was an interest of mine, and so I noticed those parallels in a way that I might not have otherwise. I'm not sure.

SARAH: No, I think you're absolutely right. I mean, there's been wordplay throughout Jewish history. You see it in the Tanakh and in rabbinic literature. And someday I hope to write a book called People of the Pun.

RAPHAEL: Yeah. Well, I mean, so much of, you know, Torah study is, like, 'Well, what does this word mean? And is there another meaning? And what could this be implying?' Like, it is very focused on the word and the different possible interpretations of the word, and, you know, is there another thing to be derived from that?

SARAH: Yeah. And then another aspect to the family dialect thing is meta-linguistic conversation, which means talking about language. There's a scene where Avi and his daughter Hannah are talking about Yiddish. I'm gonna play that scene and then we'll talk about it.

CLIP: 'Their clothes are designed to fall apart, plus they're tacky. It's giving ungepatchke.' 'Ungepatchke?' 'It means garish.' 'No, I know ungepatchke. Why do you know ungepatchke?' 'My for-you page gives me Yiddish word-of-the-day. It's fun! Yiddish is camp.' 'Yiddish is camp?' 'I didn't mean camp.' 'Of course, who could forget the B-52s' rendition of oyfn pripetchik.' 'I meant, like, old but cool.' 'So good, so camp.' 'Okay, such a nudnik. Jesus Christ.' 'Kitsch is the word you're looking for. Jews don't do camp. Unless it's sleepaway camp or concentration—' 'Bus!' 'Okay, have a good day with the other kinderlach.'

RAPHAEL: A lot going on in that scene, too.

SARAH: Oh my gosh. Totally. Okay. So there's a lot of Yiddish words that they use, and they're talking about Yiddish and just the idea of Yiddish word-of-the-day. Where did you come up with that idea?

RAPHAEL: I mean, I think that relates to what I was saying earlier, of that, like, I think for people my age and younger, their exposure to Yiddish is this kind of, like, bite-sized, like, as a quirky interest, right? Like it's—I'm not gonna learn the whole language, but, like, I like peppering it in. I like knowing a little bit about it. It's fun. To be less dismissive of it—I think it's an idea of, like, this is a way that I can connect to my ancestors, perhaps. I feel this is my language and I'm not gonna, like, actually engage with it seriously. But I would like a little bit of it. You know, I'd like to take some ownership of it. It makes me feel connected to my grandparents who used to, you know, sprinkle Yiddish phrases here and there. But the idea that the way she would describe it as camp and Avi being offended by that, even though that's how I just explained, like, it is kind of what it is, this old, cute thing. But him being more persnickety just as the linguist, like, that's not the right word. Although I do feel like I have to apologize 'cause, you know, the joke he makes is about the B-52s doing Oyfn Pripetchik, and I saw recently that Fred Schneider of the B-52s actually hates it when people call the B-52s camp. So I did not mean to demean the B-52s and I'm sorry that they do not self-identify as camp. I maybe could have gone with another example. I could have gone with John Waters doing something in Yiddish, maybe.

SARAH: Maybe. But I thought that line was just brilliant. And did you grow up singing Oyfn Pripetchik or hearing about it in school or something like that?

RAPHAEL: Yes. I don't think I ever sang it, but, like, Oyfn Pripetchik, I think of as, like, the prototypical Yiddish song like that. I think it's haunting and beautiful. And, like, when I hear it, it just takes me back to the old country, to my youth. It taps into something in me. I'm not sure where I first heard it, but it does, you know, do that to me more so than say, like, Mandy Patinkin singing, Take Me Out to the Ball Game in Yiddish, which feels a little more camp, you might say.

SARAH: Absolutely. Did you grow up going to a Jewish day school?

RAPHAEL: I did, yeah. I went to Jewish elementary school, and I went to public middle school and high school.

SARAH: Okay. And do you think you might've heard of the song Oyfn Pripetchik at your Jewish day school?

RAPHAEL: Oh, certainly, yes.

SARAH: Ok.

RAPHAEL: If not earlier. It might have been playing at the house, like, I don't know. You know, I couldn't tell you the first time I heard it.

SARAH: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I also learned Oyfn Pripetchik at my Jewish day school.

RAPHAEL: Yeah.

SARAH: But it's impressive that this character, Avi, knows so many Yiddish words and this song, and I mean, it's exactly that thing we were talking about before, about being very Jewishly specific from a particular type of Jewish community that I guess is based on your own experiences.

RAPHAEL: And I think there is, you know, to get a little deeper into Avi's character there, I think there is a privilege there that he kind of takes for granted that he is able to, you know, abandon certain elements of his Jewish identity because he has been so enmeshed in it, right? His Jewishness is unmistakable. It's baked into who he is because of his upbringing and kind of the way he presents himself and who he is in the world, so he does not feel any need or desire to keep up with it in any way that doesn't make sense to him, whereas his daughter, who is one generation removed from all of that, is aching for a little bit more because she does not feel as intrinsically connected to it. And that was a dynamic that was very interesting to me and I wanted to explore on the show.

SARAH: I loved that, and I'm excited for season two, hoping Hannah has a bat mitzvah. I wanna ask about the names. So, Schwooper, it's a brilliant portmanteau last name of Naomi Schwartz and Elliot Cooper. And then, also brilliant, the Schwooper-Hoopers when Shira marries Kendra, and that's their hyphenated name. And then Shira and Kendra's kids, Walter and Benjamin. Was that intentionally a reference to the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin?

RAPHAEL: It might have been, it wasn't—if that helps you, I'll say yes. I won't go deeper than that. I mean, I think it felt like, I like that this is, yeah, this—it connotes like old school Jewish, is kind of what I was going for, and I like that, yes, it's a guy, but also these names, individually feel like, oh, these are like grandparent names that they're naming their kids. These kind of cyclical names that come back, you know, after skipping a couple of generations because they sound old, and then suddenly they sound young again because all the old people with those names have died off.

SARAH: Yeah. Yeah. And then Elliot and Naomi are appropriate, they're names that could be but aren't necessarily Jewish.

RAPHAEL: Right.

SARAH: Naomi is more likely to be Jewish because it's biblical, but I looked at the rankings in 1950, and it was ranked 271 in the US.

RAPHAEL: Okay. Oh, interesting.

SARAH: Yeah. But her sisters are Carol and Susan, which were both ranked in the top 10 in 1950.

RAPHAEL: She's the youngest. So they got through the common names, and then we're like, all right, what else can we do?

SARAH: Yeah. And then Elliot and Naomi have children with distinctively Jewish names: Avi, Shira, and Yoshi.

RAPHAEL: Yeah.

SARAH: And that is appropriate for that generation of people born around 1980 and beyond. In my research about American Jewish names, I found that there was a major uptick in the percentage of names among American Jews that are distinctively Jewish starting in the early 1970s.

RAPHAEL: Oh, oh good. 'Cause that was, I mean, again, just my anecdotal observation that felt correct to me as well. And interesting, right? That you'd have these, kind of, very broad American-named parents, who would give their kids distinct Hebrew names that most non-Jews

would not know how to pronounce necessarily or understand. That felt very true to my generation and my parents' generation.

SARAH: Yeah. And then Avi and Jen's daughter is Hannah, which is a name that was popular at the time she was born, but it's also a biblical name.

RAPHAEL: A good, general all-purpose name for anybody. Yeah.

SARAH: Yeah. I feel like maybe Avi said something about naming Hannah after Naomi's mom, Annie. Is that true?

RAPHAEL: That's right, yes. So, presumably, I'm assuming that Annie's name was Channa. And so her, if Hannah has a Hebrew name, it's Channa. And that's the connection.

SARAH: Yeah. So there's just so much even in the names that is Jewishly specific and—

RAPHAEL: Right.

SARAH: Ashkenazi and yeah. It's really, really impressive. Oh, and even Yoshi, who goes by Josh in some professional contexts. And I'm assuming after his—spoiler alert—increased interest in Orthodox Judaism that he will maybe start going by Yoshi more fully, or, you know—and maybe stop using Josh in professional contexts or something like that.

RAPHAEL: Presumably. Right, right.

SARAH: Yeah. And then one more interesting name thing is just the name of one of the bakeries, Babka Streisand. Brilliant. How did that one come about?

RAPHAEL: I don't remember. I think that was in the writing. I mean, sometimes these things are done by the artists in designs, and they're not in the script, but I think Babka Streisand was in the script by—the episode was written by Jordan Young—I think he came up with that. You know, I think one thing we wanted to do with the show was make it feel fully of its world and find ways to sprinkle in Jewish even where it might not even feel necessary, right? We kind of just, like, add a little extra, like, you know, if there's a choice here, Jewish or non-Jewish, is there—what's the Jewish version? Like, can, can we just, like, help it kind of feel more of this milieu and of this world? And so there are other, like, small details like that of, like, we didn't need to, but it helps, I think, the whole—you know, the texture of all of it.

SARAH: Absolutely. Well, we're almost out of time, but tell us if there's anything else you'd like to share with us about the show or your own ancestral language, identity, and culture.

RAPHAEL: I think the show is great, and everybody should watch it. I think if you were listening to this, you are probably interested in the Jewish aspects of it. But if you've somehow stumbled across this podcast and you are not interested in the Jewish aspects of it, I think it works well,

too. As I said, I think it's a universal show that tells things specifically. And I think, probably if you were listening or watching this, there will be specifics in it that you identify with that you may have not seen before. That's something I'm very proud of about the show.

SARAH: Absolutely. I think it works for everybody, and thank you so much for joining us today and for all that you do to bring interesting art into the world.

RAPHAEL: Thank you. It's my pleasure. Thanks for having the conversation. I really had a good time.

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.