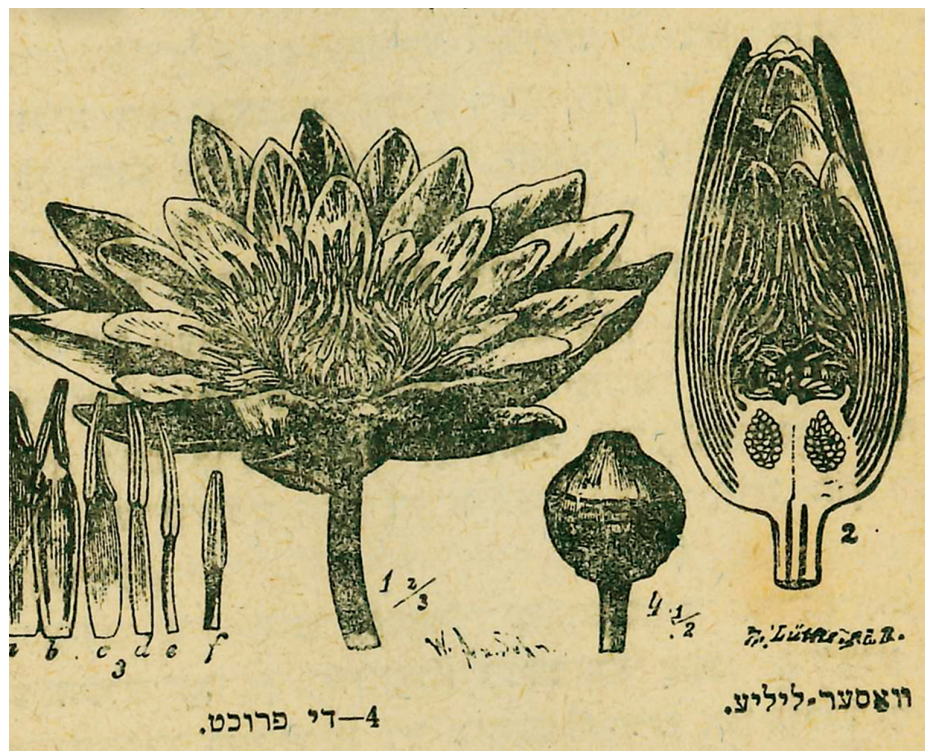


THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Left: Drawing of a water lily from *Make a Garden by Yourself*, 1922; Below: Botanical drawing of the parts of a spruce, From *Our Flora*, 1923

the end of one's nose. Peanuts, called *rebe-nislekh* (rabbi nuts) or *moysh-rabeynu nislekh* (Moses nuts), supposedly get their Yiddish name from the bearded figure that is revealed when a peanut is cracked in half.

Yiddish terminology for many botanical wonders was gathered and standardised in the 1920s for the Yiddish-language school system in Poland, whose aim was to use modern pedagogical tools to teach secular subjects in Yiddish. Teachers such as Y. Gilgich, whose introduction to *Unzer flore* (*Our Flora*) is quoted at the beginning of this piece, believed fostering a connection to the natural world was important for the well-rounded development of children.

To this end, new textbooks on various aspects of botany, gardening and agriculture were created to meet the curricular needs of students. These books contain many gems, including descriptions of the characteristics of flowers, trees, shrubs and grasses; diagrams on everything from the root systems of various plants to the reproductive parts of flowers; and explanations on topics such as the germination rates of different seeds. Some textbooks give lessons on the varieties of fruits and vegetables one might find in a usual meal, including more than a dozen types of *kroyt* (cabbage). Others detail plants perhaps less commonly known in eastern Europe, including cactus varieties found in the American south-west.

Linguist Mordkhe Schaechter spent decades combing through these sources and dozens of others to compile a complete dictionary of plant terms in Yiddish. His achievement, *Di geviksn-velt in Yidish* (*Plant-Names in Yiddish*), which contains thousands of Yiddish botanical terms, is a testament not only to the connection Yiddish-speaking Jews had to the natural world, but also to the lush richness of the language itself. ■

See: yivo.org. **Stefanie Halpern** is the Director of the YIVO Archives.

BACK TO NATURE

Jews are not known for their affinity to the natural world but Yiddish has been connecting speakers to the flora and fauna around them for hundreds of years. **Stefanie Halpern** digs into the language of plants

“The green forests and wide fields are suitable places for a lecture. One excursion in a forest, field, or garden can replace a lecture in the classroom. This is especially important for our Yiddish school. Our children, who were born and raised in town, far from nature, only know two terms for plants: tree and grass.”
Y. Gilgich, *Unzer flore*, 1923

It is a well-worn stereotype that Jews have no connection to the natural world and are physically weak urban dwellers interested in only intellectual or capitalist pursuits. This belief extended to ideas regarding the deficiency of the Yiddish language. Often defined by detractors as a jargon, Yiddish was thought to be an incomplete language, lacking the linguistic fullness to appropriately describe various concepts and terms, such as those used to name the botanical world.

In actuality, Yiddish is rich with terms describing the world of plants. The use of botanical terms in written Yiddish can be dated as far back as 1290, when Yiddish

words for flora such as poppy (*mon*), mint (*miatke*; *mente*), and elder (*buzne*) find usage. Books on folk medicine from the 15th and 16th centuries list terms for plants, including ginger (*imber*; *ingber*), garlic (*knobl*) and flax (*layn*), all used in popular remedies. Yiddish literature – both written originally in Yiddish and translated into Yiddish – is lush with nature terms. For example, the 1937 translation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* uses common Yiddish words for the crown of weeds and poisonous flowers donned by the half-naked, mad Lear, including *kropeve* (nettle) and *kornblum* (cornflower).

Yiddish children’s rhymes and games were also a source of botanical language. Take the maple tree (*nezboym*, literally ‘nose tree’), whose Yiddish rendering is a perfect illustration of how the seed pods of the tree could be split open and stuck on

