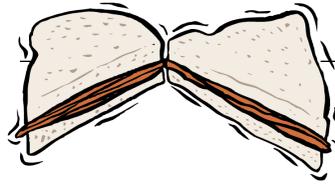




The Invention of *Bentshn* & Other Origins

By Sarah Bunin Benor

Do you know the origins of these 6 commonly used Hebrew & Yiddish words?



Pastrami

Not a Hebrew or Yiddish word, but Jewish just the

same, pastrami has a multi-national ancestry. It began as Turkish *pastirma* (spiced smoked meat) and then became *pastrama* in Romania and nearby countries. In the late 19th century, Yiddish-speaking Romanian immigrants settled in New York, bringing the meat they now called *pastrame* with them. Americans changed the pronunciation to pastrami, which rhymed with the similar Italian meat *salami*.

Bentsh A Yiddish word with two related definitions, *bentsh* means both to bless and to say *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace After Meals). It originated in Germanic lands in the Middle Ages, when Jews did not want to use the German word for “bless,” *segnen*, which also meant to make the sign of the cross.

Instead, the Jews said *bentshn*, the word for “bless” from the Judeo-Italian *benedice* (which harkens back to the Latin *benedictus*). The transition from “bless” to “say Grace After Meals” stems from the traditional Yiddish introduction to *Birkat Hamazon*: *Raboysey lomir bentshn* (“Gentlemen, let’s bless”).

Shlep

Originally in Europe, this Yiddish word

of German origin meant “carry.” Today it has the additional connotation of being burdensome, as in “I’ve been schlepping this heavy bag around all day,” or the intransitive “I schlepped here all the way from Scarsdale for this?!?”



Cholent This Yiddish word meaning warm Sabbath stew (the Eastern European variety is made from barley, beans, meat, potatoes, and vegetables) stems back to the Judeo-French “*chalent*” (warming). On Friday before sunset, traditional Jews place *cholent* in the oven to simmer overnight and be enjoyed on Saturday at lunchtime—thereby

observing the prohibition against lighting a fire on Shabbat. And in the Middle East and the former Ottoman Empire, speakers of Judeo-Arabic and Ladino would refer to their version of the Sabbath stew with the Hebrew word “*hamin*” (hot items).

This English word comes from the Yiddish verb “*shmues*” (chat informally) but stems

Shmooze

(“Hear O Israel...”) Today,

people with more Jewish friends, especially older Jews and Orthodox Jews, understand shmooze as having the same meaning it had in Europe: to chat informally, to “shoot the breeze.” For those with more non-Jewish friends, to shmooze means “network, kiss up,” as in, “He spent the whole party shmoozing (up) the vice presidents.”



back to an old Hebrew noun “*sh’mu’ot*,” meaning “things that are heard”—which has the same root as the *Sh’ma* prayer

Mitzvah In biblical Hebrew, *mitzvah* means “commandment,” as in being commanded to recite a blessing before eating bread. In Yiddish it gained the additional meaning of doing a good deed—which became so popular, many Jews have forgotten the original meaning of commandedness.



So, the next time you shlep out to the ‘burbs, pastrami in hand, to shmooze away the afternoon, think of how far you—and these words—have come. □

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