

# Goeie Ouwe Gabbers: Listening to ‘Jewishness’ in Multicultural Mokum

Megan Raschig

## Abstract

This interview-based ethnography focuses on the Yiddish words ‘hidden’ and heard in the Amsterdam Dutch dialect and their everyday salience to certain speakers/listeners in the context of national integration politics. This population of primarily retired, secular or non-Jewish Dutch Amsterdammers pursues deep and sustained engagement with ‘Koojer Nederlands’ based on feelings of attachment to the social and spatial traces of Amsterdam’s (largely lost) Jewish presence. The relationship between Jews and Amsterdammers in general is seen by them as a positive example of successful integration and is suggested as a model solution for current issues with Muslim groups in the Netherlands. Having the ‘sonic sensibility’ to listen to and recognize these borrowed Yiddish words, which most Dutch speakers already use, is conceptualised as a technology of social subjectivity in the generation of shared, inclusive Amsterdam identity. This research takes seriously the role of sound in these Amsterdammers’ daily lives to reveal an intersubjective layer of individual and civic experience that is both mysterious and mundane, a tangible aspect of what makes Amsterdam ‘Mokum’.

## Introduction: Aural Mokum

What is the sound of Jewishness? A cursory consideration might turn up the typical list: a mournful clarinet solo, a primordial shofar bleat, an exuberant rendition of *Hava Nagila*, a simple ‘Oy’. Silence, even, might be posited, a nod to the ‘un-speakability’ of the Shoah. These ‘iconic sounds’ conjure up the typical images of Jewish life, the generalised and imagined spaces of Jewishness that Morris suggests are distant and fabricated, displaced and fetishised (2001, 374). For many, this may well be the case. But for a number of Amsterdammers, ‘Jewishness’ is heard on a daily basis in the tone and timbre of the Dutch language itself. A significant number of Yiddish words have been integrated into Dutch vocabulary through centuries of Jewish interaction and assimilation, influencing common

phrasing and pronunciation and coming to signify the language of the street, the *echte Amsterdam* (Fuks-Mansfield 2003).

To a small but dedicated set of individuals, the aural/oral presence of Yiddish in Dutch is both strange and familiar, a whispered entreaty to ‘go deeper’ into the languages in order to understand their resonant relationship. Its familiarity is complex and far from complete; equally palpable as its presence is the sense that part of it is missing. *Koosjer Nederlands* [Kosher Dutch], as it has been called by Van Kamp and Van der Wijk (2006), evokes the enigmatic in the everyday, giving voice to the often silent state of Amsterdam’s Jewish past. Today’s ‘Yiddishists’ build their knowledge of the language together, through historical texts and musical recordings, attempting not to revive or reawaken a purely Yiddish sound-world but to uncover what lies dormant within Dutch, in order to better understand their own often inexplicable sense of connection to the language. Why do they feel such a strong affinity towards Yiddish, they wonder, when the vast majority of them are not Jewish and were raised in a completely secular household? What does this fuzzy but felt sense of ‘Jewishness’ mean in light of Amsterdam’s Semitic social history, and the current tension between Dutch secularism and multiculturalism?

The sense of Jewishness they feel has a unique texture linked to their status as *Amsterdammers*. Jewishness, as I here define it in contrast to Judaism, is an embodied, sensorial state cultivated in the cultural and linguistic practices characteristic of a place – in this case, Amsterdam. Where Judaism is religious, exclusive, and timeless (as Jews generally believe their souls, and the souls of future converts, have always been Jewish), this Jewishness is at once socio-cultural and specifically historical. By specifically historical, I mean that it is linked (by those embodying it) to a particular period of Amsterdam’s temporal trajectory, and part of a common heritage that remains embedded in Amsterdam’s linguistic, cultural, and physical landscapes. Often it is encountered in the interstitial and intersubjective spaces of city life, such as the man who calls out ‘*de mazzel!*’ [a modified ‘*mazal tov*’ blessing here meaning ‘goodbye’] as he takes leave of an old friend at the market, or the playful intonation of the woman on the stalled tram who, rather than submitting to road rage, asks loudly, playfully, rhetorically, *staat er een konijn op de tramrails* [is there a rabbit on the tram tracks]? For many people I spoke to, such as Yiddish singer Shura, such typical communicative form and content bespeak the rich Jewish history of the city, setting the tone for contemporary interaction, and differentiating it from other places like Rotterdam, with its (to her ears) hard-edged, humourless dialect. Amsterdam’s Jewishness is found in this “sonic sensibility”, a tacit knowledge and a potent factor in shaping people’s understanding of themselves and others sharing their civic space (Feld 1996, 97).

And yet, the majority of Dutch speakers do not share this sonic sensibility, and remain unaware of the presence of Yiddish in their language.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing essentially or enigmatically ‘Jewish’ about the Yiddish influences coursing

through Dutch. Though the topic of the present ethnography is Yiddish speech and song, typically a signifier of Ashkenazi Judaism, making sense of the *Koosjer Nederlands* phenomenon requires a broader look at just where this ‘Yiddish sound-world’ is socially situated, and who is compelled and able to participate, Jews and non-Jews alike. Speaking one warm afternoon on a café patio in Amsterdam’s Vondelpark, Shura’s eyes glow as she likens Yiddish song to ‘a *levenslied*, a song about life; people that care for anything dealing with life in a very vivid way, they’re on board’. This is music for anyone who’s ‘into humanity’, she says, a sonic celebration of enduring existence. Musicians like Shura travel the world, sharing the Yiddish sound with rapt and responsive audiences, cognizant of how well they respond to the music’s potent mix of ‘sorrow and joy’. Placing this largely uncritical appraisal of the humanist qualities of Yiddish song into the contemporary European sociopolitical context, however, enables us to discern the subtle notes of discordance in this soundscape. Not everyone ‘hears’ Yiddish in Dutch, and not everyone ‘listens’ to the triumphant humanity in Yiddish song. Listening, especially to a ‘heritage language’ like Yiddish, is a ‘technology’, a deeply social process that ‘reveal[s] significant characteristics about the particular social situations in which people are listening’ (Kelman 2006, 130).

This study of civic Jewishness in Amsterdam enters into the ongoing dialogue about memory, identity and sound in European Jewish studies, taking sensory experience seriously as an ontological practice. But rather than examining the more overt aural practices of (virtual) Jewish communities (Gruber 2002), or clinging to the conceptual ideas of silence and unspeakability in the still rippling wake of the Shoah (Agamben 1999), it pursues the ways people are actually experiencing contact with something they consider Jewish. In these pages, following a brief history of European Yiddishism and Jewish Amsterdam, and a theoretical overview of listening, you will hear the voices of these Dutch individuals speaking about their own understandings of this Yiddish sound-world – ‘aural Mokum’<sup>2</sup> – opened up in their daily speech and singing practices, and the significance of this space to their lives as social subjects in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> We will be hearing what they have to say, but also listening to what is opened up beyond the immediacy of their words, to what they are saying about not only Jewishness but its relationship to what can constitute Dutch social identity itself, in light of the politicisation of multiculturalism and ethnic integration that is currently polarising the nation.

## Tracing the Heritage of a Heritage Language

An account of contemporary Jewish practice in Amsterdam needs to be situated alongside the development of Yiddish within broader sociopolitical and historical contexts. In particular, the shift in the tenor and *telos* of the European political left since the 1980s is crucial to understanding the existence of *Koosjer Nederlands*

today, especially in regard to the two distinct streams of Jewish identification since the late 19th century. These themes surface continuously, although often indirectly, in the discourse of Amsterdam's Yiddish speakers, and their attempts to articulate their connection to Dutch Jewishness as it has transformed and taken on different meanings over time in relation to other challenging social processes.

The two main streams of political activity that have characterised Jewish life in modern Europe are Zionism, associated with Hebrew, and Bundism, bound up in Yiddish. Both have roots in late 19th century Ashkenazi life in Eastern Europe, and each offer a different organisational logic for Jewish identity and community. The Zionist movement bases itself on territoriality and exclusivity, embodied in the idealised state of Israel, whereas the Bundists, steeped in socialist-labour history, have sought to overcome Jewish isolation and exceptionalism in Europe by integrating into local settings while maintaining 'an appreciation of the place Jews occupied in a culturally diverse world' (Slucki 2009, 112). This latter paradigm has since been cited as the historical predecessor to modern multiculturalism, as it stresses the need for minority groups to maintain their cultural integrity while integrating, and is compatible in many ways with classical Dutch *verzuiling* [pillarization] social policy (Pickhan 2009).<sup>4</sup>

The postwar permutations of Bundism failed to reclaim the impact and presence of its original Eastern European incarnation due to a range of factors, not least the tragic fact that most of the original Bundist base was killed in the Shoah. Zionism is most salient in public discourse today, even as its aims were recognised in the formal establishment of Israel in 1947. Indeed, according to Chaya Brasz, Zionism and Israel have become the 'central factor' in Dutch Jewish identity, to the extent that most of the postwar Jewish population in the Netherlands has harboured a 'deep lack of belief in the continuation of the Dutch Jewish community... that the ultimate goal was to go to Israel and that there was no future in the Netherlands,' only recently finding hope for the strength and continuity of their community (Brasz 2001, 154).<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary Yiddish speakers in Amsterdam descend from the Bundist tradition, however, and its philosophy of cultural sharing continues to permeate their activities. Simultaneously, as expressions of identification with Israel increasingly have come to signify rightist political affiliation, many are looking for alternative means of remaining connected with their sociopolitical Jewish roots while distancing themselves from the actions of Israel. This distancing from Israeli Zionism, and the often Christian and rightist proponents of these politics in the Netherlands, was a constant theme in our interviews, as these Yiddishists stressed the secularism of their practice and the dangers of collapsing religion and politics into one another. Jewishness, they typically feel, has long been a 'normal' and everyday feature of life in Amsterdam, encountered daily and part of the shared patrimony of all its citizens.

## Listening To and From a Yiddish Soundworld

The remainder of much prewar Jewish life in Amsterdam can seem contained in specific secular spaces: Anne Frank Huis, the diamond factories, Waterlooplein, Sarphatistraat. In parts of town like Plantage or near the Nieuwmarkt one can cycle past old facades adorned with subtle bas-relief Hebraic inscriptions and stars of David, finding surprising traces of Jewish life in otherwise unassuming settings, sometimes hidden but in plain view. Post-World War Two memorial architecture has received a great deal of scholarly attention, and indeed it is through such conscious preservation strategies that cities often seek remediation, redemption, or simply articulation of their voided Jewish presence (Young 2000). But such buildings cannot be more than ‘silent witnesses’ of situated histories, attesting to Jewish presence and absence in only the starkest terms (Gruber 2002, 90). Sound, on the other hand, makes present what is not so easily seen; reverberant in the ‘echoic poetics’ of the Dutch language, *Mokum* is manifest (Carter 2004).

Neither as ephemeral nor imperial as theorised by Modernists, sound is best conceptualised as opening an intersubjective space for ontological practice. It is through sound, and the synaesthetic sense of deep, ‘soulful’ touch it evokes, that we come to know each other and ourselves (Verrips 2006; Erlmann 2004). Speaking and listening, the aural practices of sounding, are ‘technologies’ of subjectivity, often intimately tied to political imperatives, the ethics of public discourse and interaction, and the forms of dialogue that are both imagined and allowed in a given society (cf. Hirschkind 2004, 132). Aural practices are active and social; rather than unilaterally assaulting the individual, as Modernists like Simmel and Benjamin believed, sound is processed through sets of ‘implicit organisational principles’ that allow us to ‘make sense of *what* we are hearing and *for which* we are listening’ (Carter 2004, 60).

In studies of the sonic, sound is often cast in spatial metaphors, with the concept of ‘soundworld’ countering assumptions of sound’s ephemeral and purely temporal nature as well as suggesting how it can transform social boundaries. The ‘soundworld’ metaphor is particularly salient in research on Yiddish, a diasporic language whose homeland has either been destroyed or never really existed, in a unitary form, in the first place. ‘Yiddishland’, as Shandler (2006) terms it, is the cultural space created through contemporary Yiddish practices, a ‘virtual locus’ that can be accessed from anywhere, but exists nowhere. These formulations seem apt for studies of American Yiddishism, where the language has come to stand for an acceptable Jewish alterity, and where English and Yiddish were (and are still) not ‘divergent streams’ but ‘layered one on top of the other’ (Kelman 2006, 129; also Kun 1999, 344). However, in the Netherlands, Dutch and Yiddish flow together like a rollicking confluence, begging a different conceptualisation of the space created by Yiddish sound.

First of all, the *Koosjer Nederlands* soundworld, which I here term ‘aural Mokum’, is not ‘a world apart’ from the physical environment of Amsterdam, but an intersubjective space folded into people’s everyday social lives. For those with the ‘sonic sensibility’ to ascertain its presence, it is a formative part of Amsterdam itself, helping to make the city what it is. Further, ‘aural Mokum’ is opened up through the Dutch language itself, and thus anyone who speaks the language has access to it potentially. It is akin to what Carter has called a ‘commonplace’, a space arising between individuals in the echoes of their dialogue (2004, 43-47). This concept is based on the classic phenomenological quandary of never being able to know precisely another’s experience, holding that dialogists can never take each others’ words literally and thus are always anticipating and interpellating what the other could mean, ‘calculating the arc of their arrows’. This in-between space is a commonplace of generative poesis, where individuals work towards understanding by listening to what the other is saying and, through the ‘tumultuous incorporation of the other’s voice’, strive for mutual recognition. Thinking of aurality this way allows us to move beyond ideas of speech as purely representative and straightforward, to realise the ‘cultural work’ involved in speaking and listening. Ambiguity and mishearing are integral to communication, Carter writes, driving the creation of new symbols and word senses and new social relationships of connection in the process. Heightened listening, like that found among Amsterdam’s contemporary Yiddishists, is usually precipitated in times of collective identity crisis – such as the 2010 national election with polarising candidates at the helm, the election campaign of which coincided with my research period – rendering (what becomes considered) echoic poetics both ‘tactical and profoundly political’. At these times, for these individuals in crisis, there is increased consciousness of this intersubjective space between people as it is reached through speech.

To ‘listen to Jewishness’ in Dutch speaks to the current debates around what constitutes Dutch identity, in the tension between secularism and multiculturalism. Some individuals feel compelled to express their longstanding connection to this city and its Jewish history through their everyday speech patterns and heightened communications like singing, in the process both illustrating and performing an example of how secularism and multiculturalism can coexist. ‘Listening to Jewishness’ here is in actuality, to this group, telling a story of successful minority integration, and an attempt to engage others in this commonplace of recognition, to alert them of what they are listening to and speaking of when they speak Dutch.<sup>6</sup> This should not be interpreted as an appropriation, minimisation, or annihilation of Jewish presence – as Birnbaum (2009, 297) has suggested in reference to German klezmer music – nor either as an uncritical act of reconciliation and unity between the Netherlands and its Jewish population. It is, rather, an expression of a relationship that constructs and recognises the mutual reliance of the majority and the minority, and places a high value on the interchange that

results from this union. It is an affirmative voicing of the ‘typical Dutch’ values of tolerance and cohabitation, values which many perceive to be under assault by populist politicians, who are cutting off dialogue with Islamic communities in ways uncomfortably similar to the Nazi wartime occupation of the Netherlands (Burkhout and Pinedo 2010). Structured by an imagination of Dutch cultural openness and the deep multiculturalism of Bundism, aural Mokum is conceived as a space in which cultural coexistence is both remembered and enacted, where dialogue can happen between anyone already speaking (Koojer) Nederlands or willing to learn how it can be listened to.

## Learning how to Listen

As Carter reminds us, listening is engaged and intentional hearing (2004, 43). This is both a skill and a disposition, and is acquired over time through socialisation processes, rather than inherited. The Yiddish in Dutch is first heard in whispers – minute speech differences which, when listened to, take on qualities of the uncanny. A far cry from the imagined old-world *shtetl*, many of Amsterdam’s Yiddishists trace their contemporary Yiddish practice back to their youth, postwar 1950s and 1960s Netherlands where their young ears first heard such ‘strange words’ on the streets, in the markets, and in their homes. Boudewijn, now a leader of a Yiddish choir but living then in Amsterdam’s Rivierenbuurt, recalls the Jewish shops being open on Sunday, detecting a ‘little different way of pronouncing’ in their calls. ‘Hey, what do they say? I asked my father and: oh, that’s Yiddish. Oh, okay. And then you go on’. Joop, who has since become the lead singer of Dutch klezmer/Balkan music-theatre group Di Gojim, tells of his mother ‘[speaking] some hundred words of Yiddish’, which he originally mistook for Frisian, ‘because it wasn’t Dutch’. Recognition came much later, in ‘getting involved with Yiddish... *toges* [one’s bottom], *pikken* [to steal], *majem* [water or canal]... well, all those words, *they were Yiddish*’.

Despite this familiarity – or perhaps because of it – oftentimes the moments of initial encounter with Yiddish song are deeply emotional experiences, striking a chord of unanticipated depth in lives otherwise unmarked by Semitism. Shura vividly recalls performing in Yiddish in Paris in the 1970s, understanding little of its literal content, but hearing the audience sing along and feeling a ‘strange, un-understandable passion’ for it, beyond ‘any just artistic or linguistic passion’; Boudewijn still gets goose bumps thinking of some of his choir’s early performances. As most of the people I spoke with were either not Jewish or raised in a completely secularised, non-Yiddish domain, this powerful connection they felt (and continue to feel) to the language is a source of much mystery to them, and motivates their involvement in Yiddish music. Yiddish mediates and modulates a connection to a Jewish part of themselves, an often indeterminate and unsettled aspect of their identities as Dutch individuals, an ambiguous *joodse achtergrond*



[Jewish background] that has little to do with blood quantum and much to do with cultural and historical overlap.

But for as much familiarity as there was, and is, with Yiddish, there is also a palpable sense that part of it remains obscure, and in need of ‘lifting up’ lest it be lost. The material record of Dutch-Jewish life is felt to be incomplete, even in ‘official’ memorial sites; Boudewijn questions the authority of these institutions like the Jewish History Museum, noting that:

I saw an exhibition with real big mistakes in the Jewish Museum; uh, not mistakes, but what they don’t mention. There was a writer, and he was a big Yiddish writer. And they announce he is a Jewish writer and he did *dit en dat* [this and that], and they didn’t announce... I see a picture of that person and I know, hey, this is a big Yiddish writer, and they don’t write it down. And you’re thinking, hey, maybe you don’t know, but how do it come that I know and you don’t know? It’s a museum. So it must be educated people, what is going on? Each time you have to lift it up.

Boudewijn’s observation of the gaps in official memorialisations of Dutch-Jewish life is unsurprising, given the general lack of critical inquiry into the history of this relationship in the wartime and postwar periods. Bovenkerk (2000) notes that, although losing the greatest proportion of its Jewish population to the Holocaust compared with other Western European nations, little governmental or academic research has been conducted on how ‘this could happen’ in the Netherlands and what its effects have been.<sup>7</sup> The broad narrative of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands is one of Dutch victimhood and fierce resistance, and it remains a ‘little recognized fact that a substantial number of Dutch collaborated with the Germans’ in varying degrees of activity/passivity (p. 238).<sup>8</sup>

Deepening one’s involvement in Yiddish is, for many, an attempt to find and fill in these gaps in their knowledge of their own home. This process generally takes the form of a collective process of sharing knowledge and skills among a network of individuals, each with unique backgrounds, but unified in the endeavour of exploring the angles and expanding the edges of aural Mokum; to Johan, a participant in this network, together as a ‘Yiddishkayt’ they open up for each other ‘what are the possibilities’ of the language. Though much of this development is accomplished in interaction with the well-established transnational Yiddish knowledge network anchored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City, it maintains and even strengthens the local character of Koosjer Nederlands, acknowledged as a fundamentally patchworked tradition typical of Holland’s longstanding ‘open cultural mind’, in Joop’s phrasing.

If Jewish Amsterdam is heard in the Yiddish-inflected diction and dialogue of its inhabitants, it is through song that these whispers are amplified and strung together into more coherent (and cohering) vehicles of experience. Speech and



song both exist in the domain of the voice, and are two points on the same continuum of expressive culture (Van Leeuwen 1999). For Amsterdam's conscious Koosjer Nederlands speakers, singing in Yiddish and speaking in Yiddish are deeply interrelated practices, and it is often through singing that the linguistic, affective, and sociohistorical boundaries of speech are extended. It is also a means of inviting others into interaction with Yiddish, bringing them into contact with the 'commonplace' of aural Mokum and thereby extending the opportunities for dialogue with all Amsterdammers and the performance of successful secular multiculturalism.

## Harmonising Sores and Sjalsjelles in Song

In the organic outgrowth of the local Yiddishkayt, and especially through the evolution of Mira Rafelowicz's 1989 Yiddish Festival into today's annual International Jewish Music Festival, Amsterdam has become an established site for Jewish music. At least six *joodse koren* [Jewish choirs] practice regularly around the city, often in small group settings with audiences of other singers of Jewish music, but also at festivals and other large venues. Klezmer bands of all stripes play to all audiences, performing at the market, the squat, the club, the Concertgebouw. It is through these meetings and events that the Koosjer Nederlands speech community recognises itself in the most pragmatic sense: they arrive as individuals, each with inchoate connections to Yiddish and the cultural practices of Jewishness it encodes, but together pursue these connections and in the process become a community of practice.

As few in Amsterdam's Yiddish circles (and even fewer of the general public) possess the Yiddish literacy skills to completely understand what is being sung, the musical qualities of Yiddish songs become important resources for expressing and understanding the story that lies 'beneath'. While most individuals have their own specific reasons for making this music, and accordingly their own aesthetic intentions and expectations, all recognise the deep emotive power of Yiddish music, which can range from instrumental klezmer, to choral verse, to *nigunim*, wordless vocal tunes. It is difficult to articulate the affective power of any music, especially one that has been so popularised and essentialised in the last twenty years as the klezmer<sup>9</sup> genre; respondents often struggle to get past the genre's 'sorrow and joy', an affective paradox verging on cliché. But this explanatory lacuna is precisely the point of such songs, as they catalyse an emotive engagement that cannot be articulated in pure language alone.

Agamben (1999) writes about the nature of testimony in relation to the Shoah and the continuous history of Jewish suffering, arguing for its impossibility. Not that it is unsayable, for to designate it as such would be akin to euphemism, silent adoration, but because of the inevitable disjunct between living the Holocaust (or its repercussions for social relations) and expressing its experience meaningfully

through language. ‘Neither the poem nor the song can intervene to save impossible testimony,’ he claims; ‘on the contrary, it is testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem’ (p. 36). Johan, a prisoner at Westerbork as a child, recalls the song he is compelled to play in all of his performances with the klezmer trio *Sjalsjelles* (‘Connections’), which is

really a Dutch text with one Yiddish word in it, *hasjeweine*,<sup>10</sup> and it was a little song that embodied for me, and still embodies, the longing in the camp and during the war, and maybe still the longing for home, and longing for freedom, and longing for the lost world, longing for my lost mother, etcetera etcetera... That’s one of the songs I love to perform whenever I have the opportunity... And one of the other reasons that I still like to sing it is because you keep hoping that you will meet someone, someday, who knows it [he laughs]; but until now, not.

Johan’s example poignantly illustrates the way Yiddish songs act as affective vehicles not only for coming to terms with one’s own memories and relationships, but also for opening up and accessing a space in which to circulate these connections and articulate commonality amongst those who share them. These may be direct memories – as is the case with Johan – or associative memories, passed through ties of kin and kith. Shura, still herself feeling the weight of her parents’ suffering before, during and after the Second World War, argues that many of this generation still carry the *volle sores* [heavy troubles] of their forebears’ burden – but that this anguish is often unacknowledged by contemporary Jewish communities. As the observant Jewish communities in Amsterdam (in my informants’ opinions) can be quite insular and exclusionary to non-Jews, Yiddish expressive culture is felt, by its participants, to be an inclusive and intersubjective space where anyone with a personal connection to Jewishness – understood as anyone touched by the Semitically-tinged culture of Amsterdam – can find a means of cultivating it further.

Despite these claims to inclusivity, however, the Mokum speech community is aware that not everyone shares their sonic sensibility. They acknowledge this disjuncture in oblique ways, as in the offhand stories of the Moroccan youth who use the term *gabber*,<sup>11</sup> ‘friend’, without realizing its Yiddish roots, and in informal and implicit binarizations of Islam and Judaism. Speaking and singing in Koosjer Nederlands is a celebration of the enduring imbrication of Jews and non-Jews in Amsterdam; it is a story of multiculturalism that many Dutch people now take pride in. And as much as it flows out of the turbulence of World War Two, it is forcefully pulled by the tides of contemporary European politics, dragged along by the undertow of integration debates that place not Judaism but Islam at the fore.

## Conclusion: Polarity or Parallel Struggles?

Seated at desks arranged in a long rectangle, workbooks splayed in front of us bearing our scrawled attempts at oishes,<sup>12</sup> one of my peers at the Yiddish for Illiterates workshop at the Yiddish Festival in Leeuwarden raised her palm to her chin and asked aloud, ‘but what language is the Qu’ran written in?’ As soon as she said it she stiffened, and all eyes in the room fastened upon her, mouths agape. ‘Oh!’ she cried. ‘I mean, the Torah!’ A quiet chorus of nervous laughter ebbed the tension in the room. The man next to her shook his head and raised an eyebrow while he chuckled: what a mistake to make, he seemed to be saying.

Most of the people I spoke with strongly resisted (and resented) the tendency to collapse all Jewish life and practice with Judaism and Israel.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this equivocation is common in popular thought, and conflict in the Middle East is felt to reverberate in anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic actions and ideas in the Netherlands (Berkhout 2010). Shura, for example, notices the way her audiences fluctuate at times when Israel makes headlines, and though she disavows any clean linkage between Israel and her peace-oriented Yiddish music, she cannot ignore this implicit polarization of Jews and Muslims. Daan, a former schoolteacher, remembers hearing his *allochtone*<sup>14</sup> students calling each other ‘Dirty Jews’; ‘it was not anti-Semitism’, he says, just a lack of knowledge that ‘here in Amsterdam, being Jewish is quite normal’. He explained to them that ‘Job Cohen [then Amsterdam’s mayor], he is Jewish, and almost every time a Jew is *burgemeester* [mayor] of Amsterdam, and the next one will be too... *if*’.

Daan’s *if* trails off as he alludes to the possibility that Job Cohen will succeed in his 2010 election bid to become the next Prime Minister of the Netherlands with the Labour party (PvdA), thus defeating the emergent rightist politics exemplified by Geert Wilders and his ‘Party for Freedom’ (PVV).<sup>15</sup> The topic of Wilders arose in much the same way in most of my interviews; subtly shaking their heads or biting their lips, my respondents seemed unwilling or unable to vocalise their dismay at the potential for him, and the populist nationalism he represents, to come to power. With his anti-immigration and anti-Islamic policies, as well as his overt personal and political affiliation with Israel, to many Yiddishists he represents a serious threat to their ‘typically Dutch’ values of tolerance, openness, and secular leftist Jewishness. In arguing for a tradition of Judeo-Christian ethics in the Netherlands that is threatened by Islam, he too constructs an affinity between ‘the Dutch’ and ‘the Jewish’, but on exclusionary religious and political grounds.<sup>16</sup> An open supporter of Israel and its hawkish political stance, Wilders employs a form of philosemitism ‘driven by his loathing of Islam’ that has especially polarised Jews across the Netherlands, who are torn between support for Israel and abhorrence of religious scapegoating (Buruma 2010). There is a different kind of familiarity at work here: the anti-Islamic sentiment circulated by those

like Wilders betrays echoes of the anti-Semitic ‘rabble-rousing’ many Dutch have fought to overcome in the postwar period (Berkhout and Pinedo 2010).

In pursuing and affirming the deep amalgamation of Yiddish and Dutch in Koosjer Nederlands, these people are telling a story about what they consider to be a successful integration of ‘a people’ into ‘the nation’. Further, they believe they are doing it in an inclusive and accessible way, as anyone who shares in the Amsterdam dialect can potentially participate in this relationship if they are willing to listen to and speak it as such. This sentiment can form the very real content of contemporary Dutch Yiddish practice. Joop, for example, tells of his band Di Gojim’s<sup>17</sup> latest show, which features the ‘beautiful story’ of a marriage, as it was ‘very special in the years before the War that a Jew was going to be married with a non-Jew in Holland, even Catholic or Protestant’. Audiences around the country love it; this ‘jewel’, he says, because most people personally know of a similar relationship and ‘it’s the most beautiful thing’.

But there is more at work here than a simple telling of such a story, allegorically positing prewar Jews for contemporary Muslims to demonstrate how the latter can, too, integrate while maintaining their difference. As Daan’s lingering *if* suggests, much of this sentiment comes in spaces and stutters, in the forms of these Yiddishists’ discourse rather than solely its literal content. It is not just the shared language that is significant at this point, but also ‘the desire or necessity to communicate’ (Carter 2004, 46). This incomplete and inchoate discourse speaks to a general feeling among my informants of a breakdown of communication in the Netherlands, especially with Muslim youths, perhaps as a nagging recognition of the repercussions of *verzuiling* policy whereby only the elites of each ‘pillar’ would converse (cf. Spruyt 2006). As the Moroccan kids call *gabber* to each other outside his window, Boudewijn’s realisation that they are demonstrating linguistic affinity with both Dutch and Jewish cultures is ‘the echo of [his] own listening’ and desire to communicate with them, transforming the perceived communication situation between him and the kids; it plunges him and them into the ‘commonplace’ of aural Mokum (Carter 2004, 52). His dismay comes at their lack of awareness that they share this conceptual space, of mutual recognition and existential imbrication. To him, and his peers, this is the sound not only of Jewish Amsterdam but of Amsterdam itself. But this perceived incapacity to communicate in a straightforward way with others is characteristic of the misunderstanding inherent in any dialogue; indeed, this is what constitutes dialogue as a feedback loop of differing understandings, and upholds its goal of ‘keep[ing] the conversation going’ rather than bringing it to a tidy end (Carter 2004, 44). To keep this conversation going, though, might require Boudewijn to learn to speak some Surinamese and Arabic slang, as language develops and proliferates in plural forms, and so do understandings and experiences of place.

## Notes

1. Dutch includes a number of ‘leenwoorden’, loan words, from other languages besides Yiddish, notably German and French. Most of these words are well-integrated into the language and generally unremarked upon.
2. ‘Mokum’, or ‘Mokum Aleph’, is a positive local nickname for Amsterdam; Mokum means ‘place’ and Aleph is the letter A in both Yiddish and Hebrew.
3. Over the course of five months in spring 2011, I held six qualitative and informally structured interviews (each lasting between one and two and a half hours) with seven individuals, all involved in one way or another with Yiddish music in and around Amsterdam. This was in addition to the countless casual conversations with these individuals and their fellow Yiddish music enthusiasts. Some are professional singers, some are choir leaders, some play klezmer, some write and translate Yiddish. All but two interviewed for this paper are of the postwar generation and were born and raised in the Netherlands; this demographic – over-fifty, white, middle class and with varying degrees of past or present involvement in different folk-leftist activities and scenes – forms the focus of this ethnography. Their opinions are not meant to be representative of the Amsterdam or Dutch population as a whole, but should be taken as indicative of a predilection characteristic to this rather specific demographic. The names have been changed in accordance with the wishes of the people concerned or in an effort to protect their privacy.
4. Nevertheless, no ‘Jewish pillar’ ever developed in the Netherlands, due to the Jewish population’s geographic dispersal, tendencies toward internal migration, and high concentration in cities with strong liberal and socialist organisations. As a result, most prewar Jews were involved in the ‘social-democratic pillar’ (Knippenberg 2002).
5. There are also a number of very active Jewish interest groups in Amsterdam and the Netherlands, such as Een Ander Joods Geluid [A Different Jewish Voice] and Gate48, both of which take critical stances on Israel’s political actions and Zionism more broadly. Their influence on Jewish social practice in Amsterdam has largely been ignored, however, in published social research.
6. As a reviewer rightly pointed out, the integration of Jews into Dutch society (their ‘emancipatie’) as decreed by Lodewijk Napoleon during French rule of the Netherlands in the early 19th century was neither voluntary nor organic, and not to be romanticised by historians. Yiddish speech was, in fact, discouraged. But these details are not salient in the everyday remembrances of the general relationship between Jews and Dutch society by my informants.
7. 75% of the Jewish population in the Netherlands was killed in the Holocaust. In Amsterdam, 66,000 of 80,000 Jews were murdered, 10% of the city’s overall population at the time (Bovenkerk 2000, 238).
8. This critical lacuna is despite – or perhaps because of – the curious popularity of ‘anything Jewish’ in Amsterdam; Daan, one of the first to sing Yiddish folk music in Holland in the 1960s and now the owner of over 1,200 Jewish folk recordings, says with a knowing wink that with that label on it, ‘it sells’.

9. Klezmer, as I invoke it here and as it exists in popular form, consists of (often) Yiddish vocals as well as instrumental accompaniment, thus blurring the line between 'traditional' (purely instrumental) klezmer and Yiddish choral singing (purely vocal).
10. 'Hasjeweine' means 'disappeared' or 'dead'.
11. It bears being said that the *gabber* subculture in the Netherlands, with its especially unique style of dance, is not always the specific referent of the term as it is used in Amsterdam. In this city, it has maintained its Yiddish meaning of 'friend'. In the words of Amsterdam rap group Osdorp Posse, 'een *gabber* is geen *hakker* maar je *makker*,' in their song 'Origineel Amsterdams' (2000). This usage of the term further differentiates Amsterdam from Rotterdam (the centre of *gabber* activity) along the lines of cultural and linguistic Jewishness.
12. 'Oishes' are the characters of the Yiddish alphabet, most of which are identical to that of Hebrew.
13. However, few would speak unambiguously against Israel, as participation in leftist political circles today would generally entail.
14. 'Allochtoon' is an official term to designate a person with at least one parent born outside of the Netherlands. In general use it tends to signify people of non-Western origin. It stands in contrast to 'autochtoon', one with both parents born in the Netherlands.
15. The 2010 election resulted in the liberal party VVD receiving the most seats though only 20.5% of the very divided vote – not enough to form their own government. Wilders and his PVV made large gains with 16% of the vote, and Cohen on behalf of the PvdA took 19.5%. The VVD has formed a right-oriented coalition government with the PVV and the CDA, with Cohen becoming the leader of the opposition. Mark Rutte, leader of the VVD, has since become prime minister of the coalition government.
16. A prime example of this 'lumping together' is a speech given by Wilders to his supporters in Almere in February 2010, in which he elaborated on his plan to banish the headscarf in the Netherlands. To the delight of the crowd, Wilders declared that the ban would not apply to other religious items such as Christian crosses and Jewish skullcaps, because 'these are symbols of our own Dutch culture' (RTL 2010).
17. 'Gojim' is the Dutch pluralisation of 'goy', a Yiddish plural term fairly well-known among Dutch and English speakers to mean a non-Jew.

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### **Personalia**

Megan Raschig (1986) recently completed her Research Master in Social Science at the Universiteit van Amsterdam. Her work focuses on everyday experiences of the aural with an emphasis on intersubjectivity.

Email: [meganraschig@gmail.com](mailto:meganraschig@gmail.com)