

Knaydels Make a Splash at Spelling Bee,  
Or is it a Kneydl?

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A cartoon I saw many years ago was of a group of students standing in 2 lines in a classroom with one child in the middle in front of the teacher's desk. The punch line of the cartoon was, "And now for the final word for the spelling bee. Christopher, please spell the word Chanukah."

With variant Ashkenazic and Sephardic pronunciations, it can be spelled with a ch at the beginning, or an h. In the middle you can spell it with one n or two. Some versions have an h on the end, and some do not. Never in my wildest dreams though, could I imagine that the cartoon would become real, that a Yiddish word would make its way into the national spelling bee, but there it was, the final word of the National Spelling Bee was Knaydel, and it was spelled correctly by 13 year old Arvind Mahankali, an eighth grader from Queens. (Maybe the spelling of his name should have been the final question.) A son of immigrants from India, he has never eaten, and probably never even seen a knaidel.

The New York Times ran a front page story the day after the contest entitled, "Some Say the Spelling of winning Word just Wasn't Kosher." Surprising as it may be, there are variant spellings of the Yiddish word, and of what should the correct answer should be. It all depends on whether you use the spelling of YIVO, the Yiddish Institute, based in Lithuania before World War II and now in New York, which spells it kneidl, or Webster's, which spells it, knaidel. Or to put it in other terms, we can relate to: Whose halakha do you follow? In other words, who is your rebbe – Yivo, or Merriam Webster? For the Scripps Spelling Bee people, it appears Webster's is their rebbe and final authority. Interestingly, by the way, this was not the only Hebrew/Yiddish word in the final rounds, as the word hesped, meaning eulogy in Hebrew was also used.

I cannot help but wonder what is going on here, with so many Jewish words are being used in the spelling bee. Someone is going to say it is a shandeh. Maybe going to Hebrew school will help you in your regular studies and help you get ahead after all!

When I grew up in Pikesville, a heavily Jewish suburb of Baltimore, where the population was over 90 % Jewish, the Pagoda Inn, a popular Chinese restaurant had an explanation on its menu next to the word "wonton". In parentheses it said, "wonton is a kreplach", which reminds me of a wonderful old joke. Do you remember the one about the Chinese waiter who emigrated from Hong Kong and works in a kosher restaurant. He doesn't speak a word of English, but speaks beautiful, perfect Yiddish. Needless to say, he is very popular, as he carries on conversations in fluent Yiddish with all the Jewish customers at the deli. One day one of the customers calls over the owner of the restaurant and compliments the waiter's command of Yiddish. The owner says, "Shh. Don't say it too loud. He thinks we are teaching him English!"

The New York Times article commented on the controversy over the correct spelling of knaydel, by saying, "While most languages were formalized by national governments and their sanctioned language academies, Yiddish had no country and so relied on organizations like YIVO..."

That sentence, that Yiddish is a language that has and had no country reminded me of the words spoken by the Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer when he won the Nobel Prize for literature. In his 1978 acceptance speech before the Academy he described Yiddish as, "a language of exile,

without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government.” He explained it is, “a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews.”

He went on to deliver an inspiring message about the essence of the Yiddish language and how it reflects our values and what it means to be a Jew. He said, “What the great religions preached, the Yiddish-speaking people of the ghettos practiced day in and day out. They were the people of The Book in the truest sense of the word. They knew of no greater joy than the study of man and human relations, which they called Torah, Talmud, Mussar, Cabala.

“The ghetto was not only a place of refuge for a persecuted minority but a great experiment in peace, in self-discipline and in humanism... My father's home in Warsaw was a study house, a court of justice, a house of prayer, of storytelling, as well as a place for weddings and Chassidic banquets. As a child I heard ... all the arguments that the rationalists from Spinoza to Max Nordau brought out against religion. I heard from my father and mother all the answers that faith in God could offer to those who doubt and search for the truth. In our home and in many other homes the eternal questions were more actual than the latest news in the Yiddish newspaper.

“In spite of all the disenchantments and all my skepticism I believe that the nations can learn much from those Jews, their way of thinking, their way of bringing up children, their finding happiness where others see nothing but misery and humiliation. To me the Yiddish language and the conduct of those who spoke it are identical.”

So the next time you sit down to enjoy a knaydel, or a kneidel, or a kreplach, or you use a Yiddish expression remember the words of Isaac Bashevis Singer, who concluded his talk, “One can find in the Yiddish tongue and in the Yiddish spirit expressions of pious joy, lust for life, longing for the Messiah, patience and deep appreciation of human individuality. There is a quiet humor in Yiddish and a gratitude for every day of life, every crumb of success, each encounter of love. The Yiddish mentality is not haughty. It does not take victory for granted. It does not demand and command but it muddles through, sneaks by, smuggles itself amidst the powers of destruction, knowing somewhere that God's plan for Creation is still at the very beginning.”

I am certain that none of the spelling bee officials had Singer's thoughts in mind when they chose such a difficult word to spell, but we should surely keep in mind what the language tells us about who we are.

A post script to the story: Although Arvind has never tasted a knaidel, his seventh-grade science teacher, Carol Lipton, promised to fix that. She said she was going to bring one to school for him on Monday, to which we can only add, *essen mein kinder*.

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