

KNAIDEL

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last week a young Indian boy living in New York won the National Spelling Bee, the annual spelling championship. The winning spelling was KNAIDEL, that Yiddish description of a mixture of matzo meal, egg, fat, and spices we usually put in our chicken soup. Incidentally, I cannot imagine any spelling competition in Europe that would include a Yiddish word. Almost immediately the New York press was afire with controversy. How can you say there is only one spelling? Had he suggested KNEYDLE would he have been wrong? After all, that's how Max Weinreich's authoritative "History of the Yiddish Language" spells it!

The derivation of this Yiddish word is from the German KNOEDEL, a kind of dumpling. The fact that Eastern European Jews spoke Yiddish, a language that derived from German rather than from a Caucasian dialect, knocks into oblivion the infantile theory, first proposed by Arthur Koestler, that Ashkenazi Jews (Zionists) really descended from non-Jewish Khazars. It suits anti-Israelis to pretend there never was a link between Jews today and the Land of Israel. Every clever mind has an Achilles heel.

But Yiddish is a strange language that was and is pronounced differently across the geographical and sectarian divide. There is an old joke about how it is possible to write Noah (in Hebrew) making seven mistakes when it was spelt with only two letters in the Torah. But take Moses's name. It is spelled and pronounced Moshe, Moishe, Mowshe, Moyshe, and Maishe in different communities. What I know as a Kneydel is pronounced in the Jewish world as Keneydel, Kneydl, Knoedel, Knuydl, and Kenedel. Yiddish was spoken in a sort of European dog dialect but usually written in Hebrew characters and how it was transcribed varied from local to locale. Who on earth has any authority to say one spelling or pronunciation is right and the other is wrong? OK, so the French have a centralized Academie francaise, which decides to the letter what is correct and what is not, and that probably explains why France is such a mess and most of us would only live there if we had no alternative.

As for transliteration, that surely cannot be determined in terms of right or wrong; only whatever convention the publisher, institution, or person chooses to follow. I have in the past month been invited to contribute essays to three different institutional publications and each one sent me a sheet giving the required translations, transliterations, and styles IT requires, and they all differ.

Take the Hebrew word for a wise man. A Sephardi will call him a Haham (and by the way why PH instead of F in Sefardi, for goodness sakes). Others, mainly academic, will prefer an H with a dot underneath. I prefer CH and others insist on K with or without a dot. I have often used an H without a dot. Sometimes it simply depends on what side of the bed I wake up on. And how do you spell and write Chanukah? Hanukkah, Hannuka, Hanuka, Chanooka, Chanuka or Chanukah? When do you decide there will be an H at the end of Hebrew word?

Only when there's a final Hey, Hay, Hei, or He?

Neither can we agree about the word or the spelling for what men put on their heads. Is it a Capel (or cuppel or cupel or kapel or kappell), a Kippa (or Kipa or cipah), let alone yarmulker, yahmulkah, or perhaps a toupee. Can only one be right?

Translation is subjective. What, then, of pronunciation, spelling, and transliteration? Can there only be one correct? Of course not. That would be arrogant, inconsistent, unfair, and dishonest. We are corrupting the minds and values of innocent young spelling champions, imposing our subjective and arbitrary decisions on them as a matter of life or death, or financial reward.

But, you see, that's one of the curses of our era. We want to know exactly how a word is spelled (or spelt), pronounced and written. We want to know exactly what it means, even if by now we have all heard Wittgenstein's aphorism that "the meaning of a word is its use." We want everything prepackaged, predigested, pre-decided, in black and white, with no room for variety, variation, or inconsistency. In fact, real humans are not like that. And if young Arvind Mahankali (the winner) wants to be a great scientist as he says, he'd better get out of the habit of accepting arbitrary conventions.

And that's my gripe with Judaism nowadays. People are too busy defining! Are you Reform? Conservative? Reconstructionist? New Age? Modern Orthodox? Orthodox? Ultra-Orthodox? Yeshivish? Chasidic (one or two S's?), Charedi (Haredi)? And are you Ashkenazi, Yekke, Pollack, Litvak, Hungarian, Romanian, Ukrainian, or White Russian? Are you Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, or Persian? And I can tell you the difference between how a Jew from Glasgow, Manchester, Leeds, and London pronounces his Hebrew and thinks he's better for it, is nothing to the differences between a Mashadi, a Kashani, an Esfahandi, and a Teherani!

Do you "keep" Glatt, Gebroicks, Cholov Yisroel (Yisroel, Yisrael, Israel)? Are you Shomer Negia, Shomer Shabbes, or Shomer fiddle your neighbor? And now in Golders Green we have another one called "Shomer interfere with someone else's wife." But for that you need a full beard.

Or take me, an English Ashkenazi Mitnaged. Now rav, rabbi, or Rah Bi (yes, I do know what the late Rav Moshe Feinstein intended by that usage) of an American Nusach (Nusah) Sefardi (no, not Nusach Sfard) Persian shtible or Shtiebel or Shtibel. Either way, it's the wrong word.

Gosh, we take ourselves so seriously. Where's the humor? Where's the variety, and why, for goodness' sake, can't we embrace differences and love them, instead of using them to discriminate, humiliate, and to fight about, let alone to prize young love apart? So don't tell me how to spell, or pronounce, and above all don't tell me that your customs or nuances or idiosyncrasies are essential to being a good Jew or anything else. I am me. Accept it? Fine. Don't? Too bad.