English Loan Words of Yiddish Origin

This list of English words of Yiddish origin can be found in the current online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, or the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary.

1. **Boychik** - a young boy or young man.
2. **Bupkes** - may be related to the Polish word for “beans”, but it really means “goat droppings” or “horse droppings.” It’s often used by American Jews for “trivial, worthless, useless, a ridiculously small amount” – less than nothing.
3. **Chutzpah** - nerve, extreme arrogance, brazen presumption. In English, *chutzpah* often connotes courage or confidence, but among Yiddish speakers, it is not a compliment.
4. **Dybbuk** - ghost; the malevolent spirit of a dead person which enters and controls a living body until exorcised. The play “The Dybbuk” by Shloyme Ansky portrays a young woman haunted by her dead lover.
5. **Dreck** - low worth or lacking in quality; used especially of merchandise.
6. **Eppes and a Bissel** - a little something, not much.
7. **Feh!** - an expression of disgust or disapproval, representative of the sound of spitting.
8. **Gevalt** - good grief, from German *Gewalt*, meaning “violence.”
9. **Glitch** - slip, nosedive, a minor problem or error.
10. **Gornisht** - implies a strong sense of nothing; used in phrases such as “gornisht helfn” - beyond help.
11. **Goy** - a non-Jew, a Gentile from the Hebrew *goyim* is plural and *goyish* is the adjective form.
12. **Kibbitz** - verbal joking.
13. **Klutz** - a dense, clumsy or awkward person.
14. **Kosher** - Something that’s acceptable to Orthodox Jews, especially food. Unacceptable food is called *traif*. In English, when you hear something that seems suspicious or shady, one might say, “That doesn’t sound kosher.”
15. **Kvell** - beam, be proud.
16. **Kvetsh** - complain, whine or fret.
17. **Macher** - a doer, big shot, important person.
18. **Mamzer** - bastard, literally or figuratively. As a term of endearment, it means “little devil.”
19. **Maven** - often used sarcastically to define an “expert”.
21. **Mechaye**: a source of intense pleasure, from the Hebrew *chayim*, meaning "life."
22. **Mentsh**: an honorable, decent man, woman or child, an authentic person, a person who helps you when you need help.
23. **Mishegas**: insanity or craziness. A *meshugener* is a crazy man.
24. **Naches**: pleasure, satisfaction, delight, proud enjoyment.
25. **Narishkeit**: foolishness, from German *närrisch* meaning "foolish."
26. **Nebbish**: a hapless, unfortunate person, much to be pitied.
27. **Nosh**: a nibble; a light snack.
28. **Nu**: general word that calls for a reply. It can mean, “So?” “Huh?” “Well?” “What’s up?”
29. **Nudnik**: pest, pain in the neck, the one who makes a dopy comment after the schlemiel’s accidents, originally from Polish *nuda* meaning "boredom.”
30. **Oy vey**: exclamation of dismay, grief, or exasperation. *Oy gevalt!* is like oy vey, but expresses fear, shock or amazement.
31. **Plotz**: to burst, from the German *platzen*.
32. **Putz**: stupid, jerk, literally “unclean penis.”
33. **Rachmones**: mercy, pity.
34. **Schande**: a disgrace; one who brings embarrassment through mere association.
35. **Schlep**: to drag, carry unwillingly. A *shlepper* slouchingly drags himself around.
36. **Schlemiel**: a clumsy, inept person. The kind of person who always spills the soup on a dinner guest or himself.
37. **Schlock**: cheap, shoddy, or inferior.
38. **Schlimazel**: someone with constant bad luck. When the shlemiel spills his soup, he probably spills it on the shlimazel.
39. **Schlub**: clumsy, stupid, or unattractive person.
40. **Schmendrik**: a jerk, contemptible stupid person.
41. **Schmaltz**: means chicken fat or grease and is utilized for excessively sentimentality, gushing, flattering, over-the-top, corny.
42. **Schmatta**: rag junk or low-quality merchandise.
43. **Schmooze**: chat, make small talk, converse about nothing in particular.
44. **Schmuck**: an insulting word for a self-made fool, but not used it in polite company at all, since it refers to male anatomy as do *putz*, *schmeckle*, *schlong*.
45. **Schnorrer**: beggar or person always asking others for hand-outs, from German *Schnorrer*.
46. **Schnook**: a meek, gullible, easily imposed-upon or cheated person.
47. **Spiel** - an excessive long, involved pitch or communication. From the German word for “play.”

48. **Shikse** - a non-Jewish woman, often used derogatorily. It has the connotation of “young and beautiful.” Referring to a man’s Gentile wife or girlfriend as a *shiksa* implies that his primary attraction was her good looks, often the equivalent of “dumb blond.” A *shagetz* means a non-Jewish boy, and has the connotation of a someone who is unruly, even violent.

49. **Schmegeggy** - a dope or idiot.

50. **Schmutz** - dirt – a little dirt, not serious grime.

51. **Shtick** - an entertainer’s routine, bit, stage or gimmick.

52. **Tchatchke** - knick-knack, little toy, collectible or giftware, plaything as in “My brother divorced his wife for some little tchatchke.”

53. **Tsaddik** - pious, righteous person, one of the 36 legendary saints for whose sake God does not destroy the world featured in The *Last of the Just* by Andre Schwarz-Bart.

54. **Tsimmis** - fuss, a disturbance, also, a kind of prune or carrot stew.

55. **Tsuris** - troubles.

56. **Tsuris** - serious troubles, not minor annoyances.

57. **Tuches** - rear end, bottom, backside, buttocks, the origin of the American slang word *tush*.

58. **Tummler** - entertainer or master of ceremonies, especially one who encourages audience interaction.

59. **Verbissen** - bitter, sullen.

60. **Verklempt** - choked up, speechless; unable to express one’s feelings or emotions, from the German *verklemmt*, meaning “uptight.”

61. **Vigorish** - (contraction *vig*), usurious interest, that portion of the gambling winnings held by the bookmaker as payment for services.

62. **Yenta** - female busybody or gossip.

63. **Zaftig** - plump, chubby, full-figured child or an attractive woman, from German *saftig*, meaning “juicy.”

As in Hebrew, the *ch* or *kh* in Yiddish is a “voiceless fricative,” with a pronunciation between *h* and *k*. If you don’t know how to make that sound, pronounce it like an *h*. Pronouncing it like a *k* is goyish.

“Do not make a stingy sandwich; pile the cold cuts high! Customers should see salami comin’ thru the rye.” Allan Sherman’s album, “Hello Mudda, Hello Fadda,” contained these humorous lines in his song about food—Jewish food. While absurdity seems to lie at the heart of a startlingly sizeable number of jokes about Jews, restaurants, and food, I have often wondered what is it about Jews that makes cuisine so frequently the subject of laughter, puns, and jokes. Are we so obsessed with eating and food that it constantly permeates our thoughts and actions?
Steve Allen once commented that even the very sound of Jewish foods themselves evokes laughter. “Words like lox, herring, chopped liver, chicken soup, and matza are inherently more amusing than trout, bass, lamb stew, vegetable soup and whole wheat bread.” Evidence of this can be found in the report that F. Scott Fitzgerald used to walk into delicatessens just to hear the word *knish* being bandied about.