WEEK FOUR: Yiddish Literature

1. The earliest evidence of Yiddish in Western Europe. A modified version of medieval German that included elements of Laaz, biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew, and Aramaic came to be the primary language of western European Jews that we call Yiddish.

2. It was also in this period that Yiddish became a written language in addition to a spoken one. Yiddish was, and is, written using Hebrew characters.

3. After about 1700, western Yiddish began a slow and inevitable decline, and the eastern dialect became the more important and widely spoken one. The ebbing of the former was due in large part to the Haskalah and emancipations sweeping through Western Europe.

4. The attitudes of the western European Jews, who were desperate to be integrated into their surroundings, were largely informed by the non-Jewish attitude toward Yiddish. Because the language was incomprehensible to them, and because of the general hatred of Jews throughout Europe, Yiddish had long been regarded with suspicion. In the eyes of the masses, it had come to symbolize the "moral corruption" of the Jews.

5. Yiddish literature had existed to some extent for hundreds of years, in the form of folk tales, legends, and religious homilies. The nineteenth century literature differed in that novels, poetry, and short stories were now being written for the first time.

6. Sholem Jacob Abramowitz, popularly known by the pseudonym Mendele Mocher Sforim ("Mendele the bookseller"), is today considered the "father of Yiddish literature." He wrote his stories, he said, in order to "have pity for Yiddish, that rejected daughter, for it was time to do something for our people."

7. Dos kleyne menshele introduces the figure of Mendele the Book Peddler (Mendele Moykher Sforim), a folksy character who narrates some of Abramovitch’s best works.

8. Sholem Aleichem was the pen name of Sholem Rabinovitch. The most popular of all Yiddish writers, Sholem Aleichem took up the cause of modern Yiddish literature where Abramovitch left off. In recognition of his forerunner’s central role, Sholem Aleichem dubbed Abramovitch the grandfather of Yiddish literature.

9. Both Sholem Aleichem and Abramovitch were deeply shaken by the pogroms of 1905, and both emigrated from Russia. Abramovitch returned after two years, but Sholem Aleichem never resettled permanently in Russia, though he traveled there.

10. I.L. Peretz inspired a generation of Yiddish writers in Warsaw. He lived primarily in Zamość, Poland, until 1888 and wrote Hebrew poetry. In the mid-1870s, and began publishing Yiddish poetry and fiction in Di yudishe folksbibliotek ("The Jewish Popular Library"), a yearly anthology edited by Sholem Aleichem. Peretz’s first published Yiddish work—named after its autobiographically influenced hero—was the poetic ballad "Monish" (1888), which was followed by several short stories.

11. Tevye’s Dream from Fiddler on the Roof, by Sholom Aleichem:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6o2gLISJYwQU
Yiddish blessings:


1. Borkhashem; fr. Hebrew: barukh ha-shem, "blessed be the name of God"), blessed be God;
   Ex.: Ikh bin, borkhashem, gezunt, un di geshften geyed gut. "I am, blessed be God, healthy, and business is good"

2. Lang lebn zolt ir! (Ger., lang leben sollt ihr haben, "may you live long", Ex.: "Rebe, lang lebn zolt ir! Ir hot mir geratevet di tokhter. ("Rabbi, long may you live! You've saved my daughter!"

3. Got hot dir geholfen (Ger., Gott hast dir geholfen, 'God has helped you"), Ex. "Yankele, Got hot dir geholfen, zol zayn mit glik! Efsher voltst mir gekent layen a finef rubl?" (Yankele, God has been good to you, congratulations! Maybe you could lend me five rubles"

Expressing good wishes:

1. Zol + infinitive phrase, Ex. "Zol er shoyn kumen, gezunterheit" ("Let him come already, in good health.)

2. Halevay + clause: "Halevay zol gut zayn" ("May it turn out all right")
   Halevay omeyn ("I fervently hope so!

3. Azá yor oyf + noun phrase: (Ger. Als ein Jahr auf (mir) ) "such a good year"
   Ex.: Azá yor oyf mir, vi er klaybt nakhes fun di eyneklekh. (It should only happen to me, the way he gets joy from his gradchildren.)

4. A lebn tsu dir! (Ger. Ein leben zu dir!) ( "May you have a good life!

5. A zeyde/bobe zolstu zayn! ("May you live to be a grandfather/grandmother!"
   Zolstu hobn nakhes fon dayne kinder ("May you have nakhes from your children!"
   Gezunt zolstu zayn! Zay gezúnt! ("May you enjoy good health!")