

# The Yiddish Handbook: 40 Words You Should Know

By Michael

The Yiddish language is a wonderful source of rich expressions, especially terms of endearment (and of course, complaints and insults). This article is a follow up on [Ten Yiddish Expressions You Should Know](#). Jewish scriptwriters introduced many Yiddish words into popular culture, which often changed the original meanings drastically. You might be surprised to learn how much Yiddish you already speak, but also, how many familiar words actually mean something different in real Yiddish.

There is no universally accepted transliteration or spelling; the standard YIVO version is based on the Eastern European Klal Yiddish dialect, while many Yiddish words found in English came from Southern Yiddish dialects. In the 1930s, Yiddish was spoken by more than 10 million people, but by 1945, 75% of them were gone. Today, Yiddish is the language of over 100 newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, and websites.

1. **baleboste**  
A good homemaker, a woman who's in charge of her home and will make sure you remember it.
2. **bissel**  
Or *bisl* – a little bit.
3. **bubbe**  
Or *bobe*. It means Grandmother, and *bobeshi* is the more affectionate form. *Bubele* is a similarly affectionate word, though it isn't in Yiddish dictionaries.
4. **bupkes**  
Not a word for polite company. *Bubkes* or *bobkes* 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, so to speak. “After all the work I did, I got bupkes!”
5. **chutzpah**  
Or *khutspe*. Nerve, extreme arrogance, brazen presumption. In English, *chutzpah* often connotes courage or confidence, but among Yiddish speakers, it is not a compliment.
6. **feh!**  
An expression of disgust or disapproval, representative of the sound of spitting.
7. **glitch**  
Or *glitsh*. Literally “slip,” “skate,” or “nosedive,” which was the origin of the common American usage as “a minor problem or error.”
8. **gornisht**  
More polite than *bupkes*, and also implies a strong sense of nothing; used in phrases such as “gornisht helfn” (beyond help).
9. **goy**  
A non-Jew, a Gentile. As in Hebrew, one Gentile is a goy, many Gentiles are goyim, the non-Jewish world in general is “the goyim.” *Goyish* is the adjective form. Putting mayonnaise on a pastrami sandwich is *goyish*. Putting mayonnaise on a pastrami sandwich on white bread is even more *goyish*.
10. **kibbitz**  
In Yiddish, it's spelled *kibets*, and it's related to the Hebrew “kibbutz” or “collective.” But it can also mean verbal joking, which after all is a collective activity. It didn't originally mean giving unwanted advice about someone else's game – that's an American innovation.
11. **klutz**  
Or better yet, *klots*. Literally means “a block of wood,” so it's often used for a dense, clumsy or awkward person. See *schlemiel*.
12. **kosher**  
Something that's acceptable to Orthodox Jews, especially food. Other Jews may also “eat kosher” on some level but are not required to. Food that Orthodox Jews don't eat – pork, shellfish, etc. – is called *traif*. An observant Jew might add, “Both pork and shellfish are doubtlessly very tasty. I simply am restricted from eating it.” In English, when you hear something that seems suspicious or shady, you might say, “That doesn't sound kosher.”
13. **kvetch**  
In popular English, *kvetch* means “complain, whine or fret,” but in Yiddish, *kvetch* literally means “to press or squeeze,” like a wrong-sized shoe. Reminds you of certain chronic complainers, doesn't it? But it's also used on Yiddish web pages for “click” (Click Here).

14. **maven**  
Pronounced *meiven*. An expert, often used sarcastically.
15. **Mazel Tov**  
Or *maztof*. Literally “good luck,” (well, literally, “good constellation”) but it’s a congratulation for what just happened, not a hopeful wish for what might happen in the future. When someone gets married or has a child or graduates from college, this is what you say to them. It can also be used sarcastically to mean “it’s about time,” as in “It’s about time you finished school and stopped sponging off your parents.”
16. **mentsh**  
An honorable, decent person, an authentic person, a person who helps you when you need help. Can be a man, woman or child.
17. **mishegas**  
Insanity or craziness. A *meshugener* is a crazy man. If you want to insult someone, you can ask them, “Does it hurt to be crazy?”
18. **mishpocheh**  
Or *mishpokhe* or *mishpucha*. It means “family,” as in “Relax, you’re mishpocheh. I’ll sell it to you at wholesale.”
19. **nosh**  
Or *nash*. To nibble; a light snack, but you won’t be light if you don’t stop noshing. Can also describe plagiarism, though not always in a bad sense; you know, picking up little pieces for yourself.
20. **nu**  
A general word that calls for a reply. It can mean, “So?” “Huh?” “Well?” “What’s up?” or “Hello?”
21. **oy vey**  
Exclamation of dismay, grief, or exasperation. The phrase “oy vey iz mir” means “Oh, woe is me.” “Oy gevalt!” is like oy vey, but expresses fear, shock or amazement. When you realize you’re about to be hit by a car, this expression would be appropriate.
22. **plotz**  
Or *plats*. Literally, to explode, as in aggravation. “Well, don’t plotz!” is similar to “Don’t have a stroke!” or “Don’t have a cow!” Also used in expressions such as, “Oy, am I tired; I just ran the four-minute mile. I could just plotz.” That is, collapse.
23. **shalom**  
It means “deep peace,” and isn’t that a more meaningful greeting than “Hi, how are ya?”
24. **shlep**  
To drag, traditionally something you don’t really need; to carry unwillingly. When people “shlep around,” they are dragging themselves, perhaps slouchingly. On vacation, when I’m the one who ends up carrying the heavy suitcase I begged my wife to leave at home, I shlep it.
25. **shlemiel**  
A clumsy, inept person, similar to a klutz (also a Yiddish word). The kind of person who always spills his soup.
26. **schlock**  
Cheap, shoddy, or inferior, as in, “I don’t know why I bought this schlocky souvenir.”
27. **shlimazel**  
Someone with constant bad luck. When the shlemiel spills his soup, he probably spills it on the shlimazel. Fans of the TV sitcom “Laverne and Shirley” remember these two words from the Yiddish-American hopscotch chant that opened each show.
28. **shmendrik**  
A jerk, a stupid person, popularized in *The Last Unicorn* and *Welcome Back Kotter*.
29. **shmaltzy**  
Excessively sentimental, gushing, flattering, over-the-top, corny. This word describes some of Hollywood’s most famous films. From *shmaltz*, which means chicken fat or grease.
30. **shmooze**  
Chat, make small talk, converse about nothing in particular. But at Hollywood parties, guests often shmooze with people they want to impress.
31. **schmuck**  
Often used as an insulting word for a self-made fool, but you shouldn’t use it in polite company at all, since it refers to male anatomy.
32. **spiel**  
A long, involved sales pitch, as in, “I had to listen to his whole spiel before I found out what he really wanted.” From the German word for *play*.
33. **shikse**  
A non-Jewish woman, all too often used derogatorily. It has the connotation of “young and beautiful,” so referring to a man’s Gentile wife or girlfriend as a *shiksa* implies that his primary attraction was her good

looks. She is possibly blonde. A *shagetz* or *sheygets* means a non-Jewish boy, and has the connotation of a someone who is unruly, even violent.

34. **shmutz**

Or *shmutz*. Dirt – a little dirt, not serious grime. If a little boy has shmutz on his face, and he likely will, his mother will quickly wipe it off. It can also mean dirty language. It's not nice to talk shmutz about shmutz. A current derivation, "schmitzig," means a "thigamabob" or a "doodad," but has nothing to do with filth.

35. **shtick**

Something you're known for doing, an entertainer's routine, an actor's bit, stage business; a gimmick often done to draw attention to yourself.

36. **tchatchke**

Or *tshatshke*. Knick-knack, little toy, collectible or giftware. It also appears in sentences such as, "My brother divorced his wife for some little tchatchke." You can figure that one out.

37. **tsuris**

Or *tsores*. Serious troubles, not minor annoyances. Plagues of lice, gnats, flies, locusts, hail, death... now, those were *tsuris*.

38. **tuches**

Rear end, bottom, backside, buttocks. In proper Yiddish, it's spelled *tuchis* or *tuches* or *tokhis*, and was the origin of the American slang word *tush*.

39. **yente**

Female busybody or gossip. At one time, high-class parents gave this name to their girls (after all, it has the same root as "gentle"), but it gained the Yiddish meaning of "she-devil". The matchmaker in "Fiddler on the Roof" was named Yente (and she certainly was a *yente* though maybe not very high-class), so many people mistakenly think that *yente* means matchmaker.

40. **yiddisher kop**

Smart person. Literally means "Jewish head." I don't want to know what *goyisher kop* means.

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.