



"Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth." Genesis 11.9

WHO IS A LITVAK?

DOVID KATZ

Yiddish is in the family background of most Jewish people. If you are fortunate enough to have someone who speaks the Real McCoy kind among your relations, find out whether they say *khútspe* or *khítspe* (for *chutzpah*), *Dóvid* or *Dúvid* (for David), *béydim* or *bóydim* (attic). If the answers are the first in each pair, you are a Litvak (from the northern part of Jewish Eastern Europe – today's Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, and bits of eastern Ukraine, northern Poland and western Russia). If it's the second, don't panic, your heritage is just as classy (most of Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary and their environs). There is no single name for the southerners (though Litvaks lump them all together as Galitsyáner.

In Yiddish folklore, the Litvaks are rather poor, compulsive about finding things out and studying, but rather less devoutly religious. Most Litvaks are *Misnágdim* in fact; i.e 'protestants' (against *Chasidism*). They are also known for a certain aloofness, a coldness, and lack of humour (except for the merciless, satirising brand).

Vilna (Yiddish *Vilne*), had been known as *Yerusholáyim d'Lite* (Jerusalem of Lithuania) because of its abundance of brilliant rabbinic scholars. The pronunciation of Ashkenazic Hebrew and of Yiddish among the Litvaks had been considered 'the most correct' (though all naturally occurring dialects are

equally correct, a society's prejudices notwithstanding). When the modern Yiddish literary movement got underway in the late 19th century, it was only natural for Lithuanian Yiddish to become the standard (though the Litvaks have always been in the minority), and so it remains today.

But there are two major exceptions in the realm of pronunciation, where the Litvak's renditions are anything but standard. One is the Litvak's *ey* (as in 'they'), where the rest (and standard Yiddish) have *oy*. One embarrassing consequence is that *véynen* (for 'to live somewhere', instead of *vóynen*), means both 'to live' and 'to cry'. This was solved variably. The Yiddish of Pinsk has *Vu lákhste?* (literally 'Where do you laugh?') when you ask someone's address. In Vilna Yiddish, it's *Vu fréyste zekh?* ('Where do you rejoice?').

Then there is the fabled Litvak *sábésdiker lósn*, the language of those who say *sábes* for *shábes* (Sabbath or Saturday) and *losn* instead of *loshn* (language). And so, in Jewish folklore, the Litvaks carry forth the torch of the ancient Israelite tribe of Ephraim, whose fate is duly recorded in Judges chapter 12: 'Are you an Ephraimite?' and he would say 'No!' and they would say: 'Well then say shibboleth!' and he would say shibboleth...

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