

Talking of love in Yiddish

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Looking up ‘friend’ in a Yiddish dictionary, you might find that *fraynt* (or *fraynd*) and *kháver* turn up as synonyms. You know that one word derives from a Germanic, and one from a Hebraic root.

But when romantic feelings come into the picture, you’ve got to really know your Yiddish.

When a woman (or a man) says *mayn fraynt* about another person (of either gender), they are — in cases where ‘suspicions’ may arise about the pair being ‘an item’ — strenuously denying any such suggestion. One can deny a relationship with a woman even more sanctimoniously by invoking the ultra-platonic feminine *mayn frayndíne*.

By contrast, *mayn kháver* usually means ‘my boyfriend’, and *mayn kháverte* connotes ‘my

girlfriend’ (nowadays used egalitarianly by folks of whatever sexual preference in secular Yiddish circles).

As for ‘love’ itself, *libe* (a 19th century borrowing from German) has a modernesque, sometimes kitschy tone; *libshaft* (the old Germanic-derived word that ‘came down the Yiddish line’) is deeper. But if it’s divine love-of-God-like as in Song of Songs, then one can go for *aháve* (*áyve*, *áve* and other variants), derived from Hebrew.

Farlíbn zikh is ‘to fall in love’ but if you think your mate’s new fling is foolish from the outset, you can pour ice water with the sarcastic *farlyápen zikh* in a (vain?) attempt to extract your friend from the trance.

Gelípter (feminine *gelípte*) for ‘lover’ is quite solemn, the real thing, but the Slavic derived

variants, *lyubóvnik* and *lyubóvnitse* have a humorous happy-go-lucky connotation, and sometimes imply an illicit relationship. The clearer term for that affair is a *línke libe* — ‘left-handed love affair’.

In any romantic union in Yiddish there is the magic moment. You never forget when and where it happened. It’s when you gently asked (or were asked) permission to switch from formal *ir* (‘you’) to informal *du*. If you are a Litvak, that is. For Galitsyáner, it’s *ets* and *di*.

As for Yiddish for courtship, and erotic love, all for another day.

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