

# Yiddish Song As History

*Lyrics from Yosl & Chana Mlotek Song Anthologies*

## 1) Motele

A Song of Learning • Mordkhe Gebirtig

I. Vos vet der sof zayn, Motl, zog-zhe mir:  
Bist erger nokh fun frier gevorn.  
Baklogt hot zikh der rebe haynt oyf dir,  
Az du dergeyst im zayne yorn.  
Siz nisht genug du vilst nisht lernen gor,  
Dem rebn nebech tustu dertsernen  
Shlogt zikh arum un shpilst zikh nor,  
Un shterst di kinderlekh dos lernen.

III. Vos vet der sof zayn, Motl, entfer droyf,  
Di shcheynim zogn, ikh muz zey gloybn.  
Du yogst zikh gantse teg arum in hoyf,  
Un khaverst zikh mit yanek's toybn.  
Tsi iz dos sheyn far yidn, zog aleybn,  
Mit toybn zei arumtsuyogn?  
Host nekhtn, Motl, vider mit a shteyn,  
Dem shoykhn shoybn oysegeshlogn?

V. Vos vet der sof zayn, motl, ikh freg dikh nor,  
A groyser yung, kneynehore,  
Ven ikh bin gevezn draytsn yor,  
Gekent vi vaser di gemore,  
A yid muz lernen toyre mit groys freyd,  
Nisht hobn narishkeyt in zinen-  
Az voyl dem menth- voz iz tsu got, tsu layt  
Vos ken gut lernen un gelt fardinen.

II. Nisht emes, Tate, vos der rebe zagt.  
A shlekhte mentsh, nito zayn glaykhn.  
Farvos dertseylt er nisht vi er undz shlogt—  
Ze tatenyu, dem bloyen tseychn.  
Chob mit Avremln zikh tsevertlt bloyz,  
Er hot mayn khumishl tserisn,  
Derfar hot undz der rebe oyf zayn shoys,  
Nokh mit a nigindl geshmishn.

IV. Nisht emes, tate, siz koym aroys.  
shtikl shoyb, men ken es tsuklepn.  
Ikh yog zikh nisht un kuk zikh tsu nor bloyz  
Vi sheyn di taybelekh zey shvebn  
Vi fray zey shpringen zikh arum in hoyf,  
Vi sheyn di kerndlekh zey pikn,  
Vi shnel zey gibn zikh a loz aroyf,  
Ven zey a fremde toyb derblikn.

VI. Der zeyde hot amol dertseylt fun dir,  
Flegst oykh nokh taybelekh zikh yogen.  
Biz oykh fil beser nisht geven fun mir,  
Dayn rebe hot dikh oykh geshlogn.  
Haynt kenstu lernen un host gelt dertsu.  
Hob tatenyu far mir keyn moyre,  
Ven ikh vel vern groys, vel ikh vi du,  
Fardinen gelt un lernen Toyre.

The father asks, "What will be with you, Motl, tell me. It's not enough that you have no interest whatsoever in learning but you have to bother the Rebe. I hear you're hitting other kids, Motl, and disturbing the other one's from learning."

To which Motl replies, "Not true, Tati, not true what the Rebbe says. A bad man, no credentials. Why doesn't he tell you how he hits us? Just take a look at my black and blue? It was tiny fight between Avreml and me, he tore my Khumesh and that's why the Rebe hit us."

The father grows more aggravated. "Motl, what will be with you? The neighbors are talking, I must believe them. They say you're running around, chasing Janek's pigeons. Now you tell me, is that the proper thing for a pious Jew to do? To waste his time chasing pigeons? Motl,

tell me the truth, yesterday, did you break a neighbor's window with a stone?"

"Not true, Tati. Only a little piece of the windowpane was broken—and can be easily fixed. I do not fool around, just observe, how beautifully the pigeons fly, how happy they hop at the courtyards, how prettily they peck, and suddenly rise and fly away, to join another pigeon in the sky."

"Motl, Motl, what will become of you? Answer me! You're a grown boy now, you know. When I was your age, at 13 I knew the Gmore by heart. A Jew must study the Torah with great joy, and not have foolishness in mind. Happy is he, who excels before God and man, who studies well and earns his living."

"Zeyde once told me about you. That you too also chased pigeons. That you were not all that much better than me—that your rebbe also gave you a whipping. But now, you're learned and have security, so Tati, don't have such fear. When I'm grown up, I'll be just like you, I'll earn a living and study Torah."

## 2) Kum Aher Du Filosof • The Philosopher

A song of the Haskalah period. By Velvl Zhabarsher, 1880s.

Kum aher du filozof

Mit dayn ketsishn moykhl

Oy kum aher tsum rebns tish

Un lern zikh do seykh.

Come here, you philosopher

with your cat-like brains.

Come on over to the rebbe's table

And learn some real wisdom.

A damshif hostu oysgetrakht

Un nemst dermit zikh iber

Der rebe shpreyt zayn tikhl oys

Un shpant der yam ariber.

So, you thought of a steamboat,

and take great pride in it

The rebbe spreads his kerchief

And crosses the ocean.

An ayznban hostu oysgeklert

Un meynst du bist a khoretz

Der rebe shpet, der rebe lakht,

Er darf dos oyf kapores.

So, you invented a train

and think you're a keen fellow.

The rebbe dallies, he laughs.

He's got no need for it.

Tsi veystu den, vos der rebe tut,

Bshas er zitst bykhides?

In eyn minut in himl flit

In pravet dort shaleshides.

Do you even know what the rebbe does

When he sits in solitude?

In one minute he flies to heaven

And eats his Sabbath meal there.

### 3) Shlof Mayn Kind • Sleep My Child

A song of longing for America. Written by the great Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem, published in 1892, music by David Kovanovsky.

Shlof mayn kind, mayn treyst, mayn sheyner,  
Shlof zhe, lyu, lyu-lyu,  
Shlof mayn lebn, mayn kadish eyner,  
Shlof zhe, zunenyu.

Sleep, my beautiful, dear child.

My one and only son.

Bay dayn vigl zitst dayn mame  
Zingt a lid un veynt  
Vest a mol farshteyn mistame  
Vos zi hot gemeynt.

Your mother sits by your cradle  
singing a song and crying

One day you'll probably understand  
What the fuss was all about.

In Amerike iz der Tate  
Dayner zunenyu  
Du bist nokh a kind lesate  
Shlof zhe, shlof lyu-lyu.

Your father is in America

You're still a child for now  
So, sleep...

Dos Amerike iz far yedn  
Zogt men, got a glik,  
Un far yidna gan-eydn  
Epes an antik.

That America is for everybody  
they say, what a joy,  
And for Jews, a paradise  
Something truly special.

Dortn est men in der vokhn  
Khale, zunenyu,  
Yaykhelekh velikh dir kokhn  
Shlof zhe shlof lyu lyu.

They eat challah there during the week  
My dear son  
And I'll bake you yaykhelekh too  
But sleep for now.

Er vet shikn tzventsik doler  
Zayn portrer dertsu  
Un vet nemen, lebn zol er,  
Undz ahintsutsu.

He'll send us twenty dollars  
and his picture too  
And he'll bring us- he should live so long  
To him.

Biz es kumt dos gute kvitl  
Shlof zhe, zunenyu.  
Shlofn iz a tayer mitl.  
Shlof zhe shlof lyu lyu.

Till that good tide comes  
Sleep my dear son.  
For sleeping is the best medium.  
So sleep, sleep.

#### 4) Mayn Yingele • My Little Boy

A song of the immigrant experience. By Morris Rosenfeld, 1887, Upton Sinclair “the voice of the sweatshop worker.”

Ikh hob a kleynem yingele  
A zunele gor fayn.  
Ven ikh derze im, dakht zikh mir,  
Di gantse velt iz mayn.

I have a little boy.  
Such a fine son!  
When I look at him, it seems,  
the world world is mine.

Nor zeltn, zeltn ze ikh im.  
Mayn sheynem, ven er vakht,  
Ikh tref im imer shlofndik,  
Ikh ze im nor bay nakht.

Seldom do I see him.  
My beautiful, when he’s awake.  
I always meet him sleeping;  
I see him only at night.

Di arbet traybt mikh fri aroys  
Un lozt mikh shpet tsurik;  
O, fremd is mir mayn eygn layb,  
O, fremd mayn kinds a blik!

My job drives me from home.  
and lets me return so late.  
My own flesh is a stranger!  
A stranger - my own child’s looks.

Ikh kum tseklemterheyt aheym,  
In finsternish gehilt -  
Mayn bleykhe froy dertseylt mir bald,  
Vi fayn dos kind zikh shpilt.

I come home, broken,  
In darkness  
My pale wife soon tells me  
how nicely the child plays.

Vi zis es redt, vi klug es fregt:  
O mame, gute ma,  
Ven kumt un brengt a peni mir  
Mayn guter, guter pa?

How sweetly he speaks,  
How cleverly he asks, Oh, mama,  
When will dear papa come and  
bring me a penny?

Ikh shtey bay zayn gelegerl  
Un ze, un her, un sha!  
A troyrn bavegt di lipelekh,  
O vu iz, vu iz pa?

I stand beside his little bed  
And see, and hear, and quiet!  
A dream moves his lips,  
Oh, where oh where is dad?

Ikh kush di bloye eygelekh  
Zey efenen zikh, o, kind!  
Zey zeen mikh, zey zeen mikh,  
Un shlisn zikh geshvind!

I kiss these blue eyes  
They open; oh, child!  
They see me, how they see me!  
And quickly lock up again.

Ikh blayb tsebeytogt un tseklemt,  
Farbitert un ikh kler,  
Ven du dervakhst a mol, mayn kind,  
Gefinstu mikh nit mer.

I remain depressed and embittered  
I think to myself:  
When you awake, my child,  
You won't find me anymore.

### 5) Lid fun Titanic • Ballad of The Titanic

A song of historical weight. Written by Joshua Rayzner, 1911 (Amerikaner Shif)

Ir hot gevis libe mentshn gehert  
Vos oyf dem ya-va-vam hot zikh farlofn  
A'merikane shif hot zikh ibergekert  
Un file mentshn zenen dertrunken gevorn.

Surely, you've heard dear people  
Of the great calamity which took place on the sea  
An American ship overturned  
And many people drowned.

Oy, shtelt aykh for, libe mentshn, di kartine  
Vi groys iz gevets Got tsorn  
Veln file vaser iz arayn in di mashinen  
Un li lektere iz farloshn gevorn.

Oh try to imagine dear people the scene  
How great was God's suffering  
When all the water flooded the machines  
And the electricity went out.

Oy, khosn-kale zenen zikh gezesn in freydn.  
Zeyer freyd hot dokh keyner nisht geshtert  
Zey hobn geshrign - liber got,  
vos tustu undz tsusheydn?  
Ober der liber Got hot zikh tsu vey nisht tsugehert.

Newlyweds sat full of joy  
Their happiness undisturbed by no one.  
They cried out, dear God,  
Why are you separating us?  
But the dear God did not listen to them.

### 6) Motl Der Apryeyer • Motl The Operator

A song of workers' plight. Ballad by Chaim Towber and sung in the film of the same name, published in 1934.

Motl der apyreter  
In shap dort shtendik neyt er  
Ale yorn geyt arum in shpan  
Er dreyt di katerinke  
Un shvist bay der mashinke  
Motl iz a voyler yungerman.

Motl the operator  
always sews in the shop  
All the years he keeps up the pace  
and turns the instrument  
sweating by the machine  
Motl is a good young man.

Motl hot a vayb un kinder tzvey  
Shver un biter arbet er far zey.  
Un vos Motl arbet shverer  
Fardint der bos ales merer

Motl has a wife and two kids  
He works hard and bitterly for them.  
But the harder Motl works  
the more his boss earns.

Un Motl blaybt der zelber oreman.

And Motl remains the same poor man.

Voz zhe vil den Motl  
Der apreyter motl?  
Er vil nit keyn ashires un keyn gelt.  
Er vil far vayb un kinder broyt  
Un a mol a shikh, a kleyd,  
Motl vil keyn sakh nisht fun der velt.

So what then does Motl want?  
This operator Motl?  
He doesn't want riches or money.  
He wants clothing for his wife, bread for his kids  
From time to time, a shoe, an outfit  
Motl doesn't want much from the world.

A shtrayk hot oysgebrokhn  
Shoyn gantse tzvelff vokhn  
Un Motl iz a guter yun-yon man  
Motl der opreyter  
Az men shikt im, geyt er,  
Un shteyt mit ale in der piket layn.

A strike broke out.  
Lasted already for 12 weeks.  
And Motl is a good union man.  
Motl the operator  
When you send him, he goes  
And stands with the masses in the picket line.

In shtub zayb vayb un kinder tzvey  
Oy on a shtikl broyt hot zi far zey  
Tut Motl vey dos harts  
Ales kukt oyf tsu im shvartz  
Er dreyt zikh lebn shap dorn mit a sayn.

At home his wife and two kids  
She doesn't have a piece of bread for them  
Motl's heart hurts  
Everything looks black to him  
As he walks to the shop with a sign.

In piket layn shteyt Motl  
Un a gengster mit a botl  
Bafaln hot im dort in mitn gas  
Mitn flash vos er't gehalten  
Hot er Motls kop tsehpoltz  
In zayn eygn blut vert Motl nas.

Motl stands in the picket line  
and a gangster with a bottle  
Attacks him there in the middle of the street  
With the bottle that he held  
did he crack Motls head  
As Motl now becomes wet in his own blood.

Gevorn iz a tumul a geshrey  
Gebrakht im tzu zayn vayb un kinder tzvey  
Zey veynen, gisn trern,  
Nor motl ken nisht hern,  
Motl hot geendikt shoyn zayb zhob.

A tumult and cry arose  
They brought him to his wife and children  
They weep and pour tears  
But Motl cannot hear them.  
Motl has already ended his job.

## 7) Minutn fun Bitokhn • Moments of Faith

A song of the Holocaust. By Mordkhe Gebirtig, Cracow, 1940s

Yidn, zol zayn freylkeh!  
Shoyn nisht lang, ikh hof,  
S'ekt bald di milkhome,  
Es kumt bald zeyer sof.  
Freylekh, nor nit zorgn  
Un nit arumgeyn trib,  
Hot geduld, bitokhn..  
Un nemt alts on far lib!

Jews, be happy!  
Won't be long, I hope.  
The war will soon be over.  
Their end is in sight.  
Cheerful, don't you worry.  
And don't go around so sad.  
Have patience, faith  
and don't take it all to heart.

Nor geduld, bitokhn,  
Nit lozt aroys fun hant  
Undzer alt kley zayin,  
Vos halt undz gor banand.  
Hulyet, tants talyonim!  
Shoyn nit lang, ikh hof-  
Geven a mol a Homen-  
Es vart af aykh zayn sof.

Only patience, faith  
Don't let them go from your hand  
Our old weaponry  
that binds us all together.  
Revel, dance, you hangmen!  
Won't be long, I hope!  
There once was a Haman  
His end awaits you too.

Hulyet, tants talyonim,  
Laydn ken a yid.  
S'vet di shverste arbet  
Undz keyn mol makhn mid.  
Kern? Zol zayn kern!  
Kol-zman ir vet zayn!  
Iz umzist dos kern-  
S'vet do nit vern reyn.

So revel, dance, hangmen!  
Jews can take pain.  
The most difficult labor  
will never make us tired.  
Sweep? So, we'll sweep.  
As long as you live  
The sweeping is in vain;  
It'll never become clean here.

Vashn? Zol zayn vashn!  
Kayin's royter flek,  
Hevl's blut fun hartsn  
Dos vasht zikh nit avek.  
Traybt undz fun di dires,  
Shnaydt undz op di berd!  
Yidl, zol zayn freylkeh.  
Mir hobn zey in drerd!

Wash? We'll wash.  
Cain's red mark  
The blood from Abel's heart  
You can't wash that away.  
Chase us from our homes  
Cut off our beards  
Jews, let us be cheerful  
Let them go to hell.

## 8) Am Yisroel Khai – The Jewish People Lives

A song of the displaced persons camps. Words by Moyshe Knapheise and music Saul Beresovsky.

Efnt tir un efnt toyer,  
Shoyn genug, genug der troyer.  
Mit fonen-flater shpant atsind di frai.  
Fun di bunkers, fun di lecher,  
Shtaygn veln mir alts hekher  
Vayl mir zogn: Am Yisroel Khai!

Open the doors, open the gates!  
It's enough already, enough sadness!  
With flags unfurled, freedom's banner waves!  
From the bunkers, from the peepholes,  
We'll ascend even higher  
Because we say, the Jewish people lives!

Vider oyfgeyn dos lebn,  
Un dermit a tikn gebn  
Veln mir dos alts vos iz farbay;  
Leygt a tsigl tsu a tsigl,  
Iber undz geshpreyt di fligl  
Hot der goyrl: Am Yisrael khai!

Our lives will be rebuilt  
and we will give a healing.  
For all that is in the past  
Put brick to brick  
Over us, spread the wings  
of our fate: the Jewish people lives!

Es shaynt di zun shoyn vider.  
Durkh trern shaynt dos glik.  
Tsum lebn shvester, brider,  
Mir kern zikh tsurik!

The sun's shining once again!  
Through tears shines our joy!  
To life, sisters, brothers!  
We are coming back!

Vifl shrek s'iz nor faranen  
Heldish zaynen mir oysgeshtanen  
Getos, lagers ful mit payn geshrey!  
Yidish folk geblibn ze'mir  
Un s'vet vider undzer zemer  
Vayt farkligen: am yisroel khai!

How much terror has passed  
as we bravely withstood it all  
Ghettos, camps full of pain  
We remained a Jewish people  
And our melody continues  
Far out in the distance...

Yidish-loshn, mame-loshn  
Nit farshtumt un nit farloshn  
Oysgesheylyt iz shoyn fun payn un vay  
Fun di ashn, fun di shtoybn  
Vi a fon aroysgehoybn  
Hobn mir es - am yisroel khai!

Yiddish language, mother tongue  
Not silenced nor lost  
Exposed already is our pain and suffering  
From the ashes, from the dust  
Like a flag unfurled  
We still have it.