

Ella Kvellephant and the Search for Bubbe's Yiddish Treasure

Jen Kostman's *Ella Kvellephant* follows Ella, a young Jewish elephant, on her day at the beach with her family as she searches for lost treasure—her Bubbe's Yiddish. Throughout their beach day, Bubbe uses many Yiddish loanwords. She explains to Ella that when she was younger, she spoke Yiddish. Now, she only knows a few select words. Ella continues searching high and low for Bubbe's Yiddish, to no avail. Eventually, Ella herself starts using the Yiddish loanwords she learned from Bubbe. Thus, she finds the lost language and saves it from being completely forgotten. As a whole, the book emphasizes the need for Yiddish and Jewish culture in general to continue to be passed on throughout generations, even if it may only be through select loanwords.

Often, children's literature includes literary techniques like alliteration, repetition, and rhyme. However, *Ella Kvellephant* does not really follow this idea. There is no alliteration or rhyme scheme at all, and there is only one prominent instance of repetition. This repetition comes in Ella's later use of the Yiddish words Bubbe uses throughout the story. While this is the only real employment of typical literary techniques in children's literature, it is a very important one. The entire story revolves around the idea that Ella needs to find Bubbe's Yiddish by learning it herself. The book builds up to this all the way until the resolution through Bubbe's dialogue. The Yiddish loanwords are vital to what she is saying. They are even capitalized and colored bright red amongst the plain black text, emphasizing their importance. When Ella eventually repeats the words that Bubbe has said, she resolves the conflict. In using Yiddish words, Ella discovers the lost Yiddish she has been searching for all day. This kind of intergenerational transmission of a language is vital to preventing language endangerment and eventually extinction (Austin and Sallabank, 2011). Ella may not be fluent in Yiddish, but Bubbe's teachings, while indirect, keep Yiddish alive within their family and thus throughout the world. Intergenerational transmission solidifies a language's relevance to a group of people, thus also solidifying its place in world culture. Without it, a language will fizzle out.

In addition to the literary techniques, children's literature often attaches some sort of lesson to their story. *Ella Kvellephant* is no different. With Ella's story, Kostman presents the idea that a person's Jewish heritage is always within them, even if that person isn't the most active within Jewish culture. In using Yiddish loanwords, Ella reconnects with her Jewish heritage. It may have taken a lot of work to find it buried so deep within her, but it was still always there. Additionally, Kostman emphasizes the importance of passing down the Yiddish language through generations. She wants young Jewish people to be educated in their culture, thus allowing it to thrive amongst them. Yiddish may not technically be classified as endangered, but its use in secular Jewish communities is very much limited. In many Hasidic communities, it thrives. However, based on interviews with members of the Yiddish metalinguistic community, it is clear that the relevance of Yiddish in their lives is limited to the classroom (Avineri, 2014).

They were not exposed to it, much like Ella wasn't. Through Ella's journey, she as well as Kostman's audience of young children become exposed to Yiddish. Further, by portraying the joy that Ella's knowledge of Yiddish brings to Bubbe, kids may be even more encouraged to learn it.

In this way, *Ella Kvellephant* becomes a postvernacular take on Yiddish. In a time where Yiddish isn't commonly used as the primary language of communication in most communities, it can become a symbol of Jewish culture in general (Shandler, 2005). Therefore, when Yiddish thrives, Jewish culture thrives as well. Kostman purposely wrote *Ella Kvellephant* as an introduction to Yiddish, as illustrated in the Yiddish glossary at the end of the book. Additionally, she even explains what Yiddish is through Bubbe's dialogue, simultaneously educating Ella and her young audience. In introducing Yiddish, she also introduces Jewish culture. Ella's journey is reflective of the journey Kostman hopes her readers will go on themselves. Kostman exposes Ella and her readers to Yiddish through Bubbe—and subsequently the glossary—and Jewish culture through Bubbe's explanation of Yiddish. The book itself teaches its readers Yiddish, just as she is pushing for.

Throughout history, Yiddish has slowly disappeared amongst American Jews. After migrating to the United States, Eastern European Jews began assimilating into American culture. As a result, they switched from Yiddish as their primary language to English. They needed to in order to adapt to life in their new country. So, Yiddish was combined with English to form Jewish English, much like how Bubbe speaks in the book. In fact, Bubbe's own journey with Yiddish mirrors this historical shift. She used to speak Yiddish all the time, but is now limited to a few words. In her sentences, there are Yiddish content words, but the vast majority of them, including the function words, are in English. Many of these Yiddish words and phrases even made their way into the non-Jewish English language (Benor, 2022). This furthers the idea that Ella's Jewish culture has been within her all along. Even when she thinks she's just speaking English, there are many Yiddish words that she uses without even realizing.

The Yiddish language is a major part of Ella's heritage. Her Bubbe still uses it and it can be inferred that her ancestors before her spoke Yiddish as well. In order to connect with and understand her heritage, Ella must learn Yiddish. Heritage itself is a way for people to connect with their family and other Jewish people around the world (Dean-Olmsted, 2012). In Ella's case, it is a way for her to further connect with Bubbe, something that she has made clear is important to her throughout the book. Ella and Bubbe's use of Yiddish in the book is an example of heritage words. Thus, through the use of Yiddish, they are further connecting themselves to their Jewish heritage, just as Kostman wants them to. Both of their lexicons expand from English to include Yiddish heritage words.

Overall, Kostman uses Ella's journey with Yiddish to stress the vitality of keeping children engaged with their Jewish heritage. In the context of Ella's story, that mainly includes the transmission of Yiddish through generations. Her Yiddish becomes a greater symbol for Jewish culture in general. As she learns more Yiddish, Ella is able to connect more with Bubbe and the Jewishness within her. In portraying this connection as a joyous occasion, Kostman frames Yiddish and Jewish culture in a positive light for her young audience. This may spark a greater interest in Yiddish or Jewish culture, allowing them to thrive amongst younger generations. Without this interest, Yiddish will continue to die out amongst secular communities and Jewish culture will not be as prevalent, especially within American society.

Works Cited

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