GLOSSARY OF HEBREW AND YIDDISH TERMS

Ashkenazim  Jews whose ancestors come from Central and Eastern Europe; the vast majority of American Jews (see Sephardim).

Baal Teshuvah  One who returns to Judaism; one who renews one's faith.

Bar (Bat) Mitzvah  Thirteen year old boy (or twelve year old girl) who has taken on the Commandments as an adult in the Jewish community; coming of age ceremony held in the synagogue.

Brith (Bris)  Circumcision ceremony signifying the covenant.

Broche  Blessing; a prayer of thanksgiving or praise.

Bubbe (Bubeleh)  Affectionate diminutive for grandmother.

Canaan  Ancient name for the Promised Land.

Chachma  The divine spirit of Wisdom; philosophical knowledge; a profound or astute saying.

Chanukah  Eight day holiday festival (usually falling in December) commemorating the victory of the Jewish Maccabees in a fight for religious freedom (167 B.C.).

Chasid (Chasidim)  A very pious man; a disciple of a great rabbi or follower of the chassidic philosophy and way of life that emerged in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century.

Chazzen  The cantor; a trained professional singer who assists the rabbi in religious services.

Chutzpa  Vast impudence, boldness, gall.

Daven  To pray; a traditional Jew davens three times a day (sachris, minchah, and mairev) and adds supplementary prayers on the Sabbath (shabbos) and holidays and festivals.

Diaspora  Settlement of Jews around the world.

Dreck  Excrement; trash, junk, garbage; cheap or worthless things (can be applied to objects, food, films, books, etc.).

Eretz Yisroel  The land of Israel; the Promised Land, promised by God to Abraham and his descendants; the land on which the Holy City of Jerusalem was built.

Fress (Fresser)  To eat; someone who eats a great deal and with manifest pleasure.

Galut  Exile; the Diaspora; the dispersion of the Jews among the lands outside of Israel; sometimes, a state of alienation or uneasiness deriving from residing among others.

*Source: Chiefly, Leo Rosten, The Joys of Yiddish (New York, 1968)
Gaon  Head of a Talmudic academy; rabbi of great learning; a genius.

Gelt  Money.

Goyim  A non-Jew or gentile [Note: Mormons call any non-Mormon a gentile. Hence to the Mormons Jews are gentiles].

Haftorah  A chapter from the Prophets, read in the synagogue (after the portion from the Pentateuch) on Sabbath and festivals.

Haimish  Warm, friendly, unpretentious (applied to a home or place).

Halakhah  Jewish law and accumulated jurisprudence.

Haskalah  The movement of enlightenment, intellectual emancipation, libertarian and secular education among Jews, like the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

Heder  Elementary Hebrew school.

Holocaust  Systematic destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis between 1941 and 1945.

Israel  The Jewish people; the ancient Northern Kingdom of the Jews; the Jewish nation created in the Middle East in 1948.

Kabbalah  Jewish mystical tradition in literature and philosophy.

Kaddish  The mourner’s prayer; a prayer glorifying God’s name, recited at the close of synagogue prayers; the most solemn and one of the most ancient of all Jewish prayers.

Kashrut (Kosher)  Jewish dietary laws (fit to eat according to law).

Kibbitz  To comment as a bystander or observer at a game or any other activity.

Kiddush  The prayer and ceremony that sanctifies the Sabbath and Jewish Holy Days.

Kinder  Children.

Klezmer  A form of Eastern European Jewish music.

Kohen  Ancient Hebrew priest.

Kvell  To display great pride, most commonly over the achievements of children.

Kvetch  As a verb: to squeeze, pinch or eke out or to complain and fret; as a reflexive verb: to exert or to push oneself; as a noun: anyone who excessively gripes and frets, a chronic complainer.

Ladino  The vernacular used by Sephardic Jews.

Landsman  A fellow immigrant who comes from the same town in the old country.

Landsmanschaft  Society of immigrants from the same town or region in the old country.

Luftmensch  Someone with his head in the clouds; a sensitive, poetic type; an impractical person; someone without a regular occupation

Makher  Busybody, operator; a “big wheel” or overly zealous organizational leader.

Mama-loshen  The mother tongue, or Yiddish.
Maskil  Learned man.
Mavin  An expert (sometimes self-declared); a knowledgeable person or good judge of quality in a product or activity.
Mazel  Luck.
Mazel Tov  Congratulations.
Melamed  Elementary Hebrew teacher.
Mensch  An especially decent and honorable person; someone to admire and emulate.
Menschlikheit  Culture of honorable behavior.
Meshiach (Messiah)  The awaited Deliverer of the Jews from their bondage and oppression, who will restore the Kingdom of Israel establish a reign of peace and justice; the Savior who will make the world acknowledge God’s sovereignty and lead humanity to the Day of Judgment.
Meshugge  Crazy; someone who behaves oddly.
Midrash  Complex Rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures.
Mikvah  Jewish ritual bath for women.
Minyan  Quorum of ten (men in orthodox practice) necessary for religious services.
Mishegoss  An odd or irrational belief; a state of affairs so unreal it defies explanation; a fixation.
Mishnah  Oral law discussed by the sages and recorded in the Talmud.
Mishpocheh  Family; ancestors; lineage.
Mitzvah  Divine commandment; a good deed.
Naches  Pleasure of pride in something, often from the achievements of children; psychological reward or gratification from doing something.
Neshoma  Soul; the source or breath of life.
Orthodox  In accord with the belief that the written and oral law is of divine origin; denomination of Judaism holding such a view.
Palestine  Name of the Holy Land before it became Israel.
Passover  Festival celebrating biblical liberation from slavery in Egypt.
Patriarchs  Biblical ancestors of the Jews: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
Pentateuch  The Torah or the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures; the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).
Pogrom  Violent campaign against Jews.
Prophet  One who speaks the word of God.
Rabbi  Ordained Jewish religious leader and teacher.
Rav  Babylonian title for Jewish scholar.
Rebbe  Chassidic leader, Yeshiva teacher.
Rosh Hashonah  The Jewish New year; begins the Ten days of Penitence (or Awe) which end with Yom Kippur.
Sephardim  Jews who are descended from those who had their origin in Southern European nations (particularly Spain and Portugal).
Shabbat (Sabbath)  Saturday; the seventh day; the day of rest.
Shavuot  Festival of the First Fruits, which also celebrates the giving of the Torah.
Shlemiel  Bumbling, luckless person.
Shmuck  A dope or fool (usually used contemptuously).
Shnorer  Beggar; miser; someone who takes more than a fair share of something.
Shoah  Hebrew term for the Holocaust.
Shtetl  Small eastern European town largely inhabited by Jews.
Shtik  Originally, a bit or piece of something (a shtik cake); now a piece or bit as in a comic routine or sometimes a serious form of discourse.
Shtiklech  Bits and pieces, or odds and ends.
Shul  A synagogue.
Siddur  Jewish Prayer Book.
Simchah  A celebration of a life cycle event or any ordinary one.
Sukkot  Autumn harvest festival.
Synagogue  Meeting place where prayer services are held.
Tallis  Fringed prayer shawl.
Talmud  Record of the oral law compiled in Palestine and Babylonia in the fifth and sixth centuries.
Tefilla  Prayer.
Tefillin  Leather straps with small boxes attached (containing passages from Scripture) worn during prayer by Orthodox Jews.
Tikkun  Repair, healing.
Torah  Jewish Law; The Pentateuch.
Tsadik  Spiritual leader, holy man.
Tsedaka  Charity.
Tsouris  Troubles, worries, or suffering.
Yarmulke  Skullcap worn by observant Jewish males.
Yente  Female busybody.
Yeshiva  Talmudic academy.
Yiddish Language of Ashkenazic Jewry.
Yiddishkeit Eastern European Jewish Culture.
Yom Kippur With Rosh Hashonah one of two High Holy Days of the Jewish Calendar; ends the Ten Days of Penitence.
Zionism International movement dedicated to the return of the Jewish people to the Promised Land of Israel.