The ‘National Language Of Nowhere’
Yiddish may no longer be the Jewish mamaloshen, but it is anything but dead, as two new books illustrate.
Sandee Brawarsky - Special To The Jewish Week
Jeffrey Shandler

Jeffrey Shandler’s new book, “Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture,” (University of California Press) explores the shifting relationship of Yiddish language to Jewish culture and identity since World War II. Although this is a more academic book than Wex’s, Shandler writes in an engaging style.

Yiddishland is an imaginary realm defined by the use of Yiddish. For some it’s a kind of Yiddish utopia. For one of Shandler’s students, it’s wherever two people speak Yiddish to one another. It’s a portable sense of place, as Shandler, a professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers University, explains.

Shandler, 48, describes himself as a native listener of Yiddish. He grew up around grandparents who spoke the language; he wasn’t expected to answer, but to understand. After finishing college, he decided to study the language and as he became more fluent, he became increasingly interested in issues of identity and culture.

Ben Katchor did an original painting for the book jacket, depicting an urban Yiddishland as an imaginary landscape with a theater, café and a nearby harbor, with the ship “Bobe-mayse” in port.

Postvernacular refers to the fact that for most Jews, Yiddish is no longer an everyday language. “It’s a mode of engaging with Yiddish in which the symbolic meaning of language is considered at least as important as the primary level of meaning as a form of communication. This is not something that existed before World War II,” he tells The Jewish Week.

As the vernacular use of the language is in decline, the symbolic value is growing. Many people express a profound attachment to Yiddish, even as they don’t really know it. And their lack of fluency doesn’t diminish their interest. For Shandler, Yiddish “hasn’t simply dwindled,” hasn’t died, but has become something significantly different. Shandler details examples of Yiddish festivals, performance art, literature, material culture and the ways in which chasidim take part in and create Yiddish culture.

As for the Yiddish future, Shandler is reluctant to make predictions, but hopes that readers will come away with a more expansive sense of possibilities of what Yiddish can mean. “We can learn by looking at post-World War II culture, which is full of surprises. Who would have thought that Yiddish would have the presence it does in the academy, or with avant garde Jewish musicians or that young Israelis would look to Yiddish as a way to reclaim their Ashkenazism?”