

In New York City, The Dogs Speak Yiddish

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Is your dog *meshugena* or a *mensch*?

This is the question posed by [The Workmen's Circle](#), a progressive Jewish organization that's been making "fetch" happen — but in Yiddish — for dozens of dogs and their owners in New York City.

Their event, Yiddish for Dogs in Central Park, had already generated a waiting list of 40 people for October 15, the most recent (and second-ever) session. As it turns out, a lot of people resonate with the idea of teaching their dog to "*shtai*" (stay), regardless of whether they have Jewish roots or not.



Attendee Nola Bonis came with her dog, Darwin ("He's very smart"), who already understands English and Spanish.

"My friend told me about it and I was like, that's so cute," Bonis said. "He needs to learn another language."

"We actually have gotten people from all cultures," said Ann Toback, executive director of The Workmen's Circle. "There are a lot of people who are really fascinated by eastern European culture, but I think the majority are Jewish, and they're people who are looking to connect with their roots, their traditions, their cultural heritage. Yiddish is something that people really feel in their hearts, and I think this gives them a chance to say, 'I can live it with my dog.' It was always a living language, so how appropriate is it that today, we continue that heritage?"

Put more simply (and in Toback's enviously punny words), "You can teach your dog to fetch — and not to *kvetch* — in one hour."

The Workmen's Circle runs the largest Yiddish language program in the United States, with more than 450 (human) students participating each year. This is a feat when you consider that "oy vey" is about as much Yiddish as most Americans know. The number of people in the United States who spoke Yiddish at home [dropped nearly 50%](#) between 1980 and 2007, and by another approximately 1,000 Yiddish speakers per year between 2007 and 2011. Aside from the small enclaves of Orthodox Jews who continue to speak it almost exclusively — and mostly in Brooklyn — it's a language that's more or less on the way out.

The realization of an intimate Sunday morning dog training *schmooze* on a grassy lawn in Central Park was a dream come to fruition for Toback. Echoes of "Zits!" (Sit) punctuated the misty air, and coffee and rugelach were had by all. Except, perhaps, for the attendees who were too busy gnawing on *schticks*.

Zits!

Sit!

Shtai!

Stay!

Tsurik!

Fetch!

Gut!

Good!

"I always thought there must be many different doorways to the Yiddish language," Toback said. "And I know so many people are intimidated by learning the language, and so my dream was always to combine different communities, and in this case, the dog community and the Yiddish community. To give people a chance on a Sunday morning to connect with their roots and their heritage while with their best friends."

To facilitate this process, Toback enlisted the help of Miguel Rodriguez, a certified master dog trainer, and Adrian Silver, an advanced Yiddish student who has been involved with the Circle for about six years.

"I find that teaching dogs in Yiddish is almost easier than English because the words seem a lot sharper," said Rodriguez. "When you say 'sit,' compared to 'zits,' one sounds a lot sharper and more distinguished. And dogs, they don't necessarily remember vocabulary — they remember tones. So the sharper the tone, the easier it is for them to remember it."



Toback and her dog, Jesse.

By the looks of it, the excitable students certainly possessed the *chutzpah* to pick up the commands fairly easily. As Silver explained to us, though, there isn't much of a Yiddish tradition to fall back on when it comes to communing with dogs.

"Yiddish speakers didn't traditionally speak to their dogs, or animals in general, in Yiddish," he said. "They would almost always use the dominant language of the culture they lived in. There isn't really a standardized terminology to use, but in a way, that's part of the fun: making Yiddish a kind of living language that suits our lives now."

Of course, the burning question here is: how do the dogs feel about it?

Well, as Rodriguez had previously explained to Toback, foreign commands tend to resonate more with dogs who are accustomed to hearing words in another language (like English). And the pup-ils seemed eager to succeed at their language lessons, given that there were homemade treats involved.

But there's reason to believe that different languages can strike a chord with our furry *bubbehs*, and that's because they often strike a chord with us.

"The words '*gut hunt*' (which is 'good dog' in Yiddish) — he looks at me like he does when I say 'good dog,'" Toback said. "It's funny, it definitely hits his ear in a different way and I find that kind of cute."