

In Central Park, Teaching Dogs to Sit (in Yiddish)

[nytimes.com /2017/09/20/nyregion/in-central-park-teaching-dogs-to-sit-in-yiddish.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/nyregion/in-central-park-teaching-dogs-to-sit-in-yiddish.html)

ALIX STRAUSS

9/20/2017



The humans gathered for coffee and chocolate rugelach at the check-in table near the 67th Street and Fifth Avenue entrance of Central Park. The dogs sampled homemade apple cookies, or kichel, and sipped water. Owners were encouraged to take training treats to keep in their pockets.

By 10:30 a.m. seven participants and their owners were ready. Well, as ready as dogs could be to learn Yiddish.

The class was organized by [Workmen's Circle](#), a progressive Jewish community and education nonprofit. "People want to teach their dog Yiddish," said David Dossick, the event manager at the Circle. "It's a New York thing to do."

Steve Zelman, 69, from Sutton Place, Manhattan, was there with Ollie, his longhaired miniature dachshund to "meet some nice Jewish dogs," he said.

Edna Schwartz, also 69, came in from Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, with Puma, her miniature poodle, for the training aspect. "My family would yell at us in Yiddish, so this reminds me of my childhood," she said. "My dog is here to learn how to behave, listen and respond."

Some came to reconnect with their roots while tricking their children into learning a new language.

"My dog may not care, but it's a sneaky way for my son to hear a little Yiddish," admitted Mauri Tamarin, 62, who came in from Larchmont with her son Abe, husband, Ron, and their Tibetan spaniel, Toby.

This was the first time the Circle had offered a dog-education class. Tickets were \$10. A similar event is planned for Oct. 15. The idea was Ann Toback's, executive director of the Circle, whose overly excited goldendoodle, Jessie, was busy jumping on guests.

"I'm always looking for fun programs that will engage people around our heritage," she said. "New Yorkers love their dogs. This was a great way to integrate the two."

The first exercise was the loose-leash walk. Everyone stood in a straight line, then they walked to and around [Miguel Rodriguez](#), a certified master dog trainer, and returned to their starting spot.



The class was the brainchild of Ann Toback, the executive director of Workmen's Circle. Ms. Toback, center, brought her dog, Jessie, to the session. Damon Winter/The New York Times

Then came the commands; first in English, then in Yiddish.

"Zits!" (sit) shouted Mr. Rodriguez.

"When you give a dog a command, you want to over-pronounce the first and last letter in each word," said Mr. Rodriguez. "You can hear the z and t are very strong. Dogs take well to tones, not vocabulary." Dogs won't memorize words, he explained, but they will remember the sounds of them. "Sometimes they take to Yiddish words better than English."

The next 30 minutes were spent learning, and then following, additional commands: Arop (down); shtai (stay); gut (good); neyn (no); kum (come); maykhl (treat).

"Group classes can be hard," Mr. Rodriguez said. "At home there are minimal distractions. In the park there are birds, squirrels and treats."

Not everyone came with a pet. Jana Goldin, 68, who said she is "presently dogless," sat off to the side in a chair she

had brought from home as if she were attending a sporting event.

Toward the end of class, many people had broken away from the group to practice on their own. People seemed pleased with their dogs' progress.

Bonnie Winkelman, 62, was kvelling (gushing) over her Lhasa apso, Einstein. "This was great practice; he learned better eye contact," she said. "I'll be using the words and practicing with him at home."

Amanda Devons, 67, had come all the way from Eureka, Calif., with Raffi, her bichon frisé. They were here visiting family.

"I'm having such a good time," she said. "Last year I went to [Yiddishland](#) camp with the Circle, and I couldn't bring him," she said, referring to Raffi. "Now I get to do two things I love."

After taking a group photo, everyone milled about kibitzing (giving unwanted advice) rather than kvetching (complaining). Gift bags were dispersed, and an old form of communication had been honored.

"This is an affirmation of culture and life," Ms. Devons said. "It's another positive way of being Jewish and bringing back a dying language. I had no one to speak it to. Now I can speak it to my dog."