Unlock Sephardi Culture and Connection with these 10 Ladino Phrases

Growing up in Seattle, I was fortunate to be surrounded by the city's vibrant Sephardi Jewish community. My grandmother's partner, Bill Halfon (of blessed memory), was a proud descendant of a Rhodesli (from Rhodes) Jewish family and a passionate lover of Ladino. Called "Papoo" by his grandchildren (Pappous is "grandpa" in Greek), Bill would often teach us Ladino phrases, sharing stories about his family's heritage and the rich cultural traditions of the Sephardi community. Seattle, with its large Sephardi population, was the perfect place to grow up immersed in the language and flavors of this unique Jewish culture.

Ladino, often called Judeo-Spanish, is a language with a rich history and cultural significance. Emerging in the 15th century among Sephardi Jewish communities in the Iberian Peninsula, Ladino blends elements from Hebrew, Spanish, Turkish, and other languages. Some phrases common in Ladino culture are borrowed from Spanish and used in many Latin American countries. Though historically written in the Hebrew alphabet, Ladino is now more commonly written using the Latin alphabet.

Despite facing decline and near-extinction, Ladino has experienced a recent resurgence - especially in Seattle - with efforts to revitalize and document the language. My personal favorite source of recent Ladino learning? Netflix's The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem. The Ermoza family, who speak mostly Ladino and Hebrew on the show, portray how Sephardi families may have used both languages in pre-state Israel.

Whether you're exploring your own Sephardi heritage or simply interested in the beautiful diversity of the Jewish people, Ladino offers a wealth of expressions to enrich your conversations. Here are 10 phrases to get you started:

1. ***Boka de ayer*** - Mouth of yesterday.

Meaning: Someone who often speaks nonsense or outdated ideas.

Use it when teasing someone about their outdated opinions.

Example: Friend: "Skinny jeans are making a comeback!" You: "*Boka de ayer!*"

2. ***Komo gayo*** - Like a rooster.

Meaning: Proudly or haughtily.

Use it when describing someone's confident attitude.

Example: "I'm not so sure about my teen's boyfriend... even the way he walks is *komo gayo*!"

3. ***La mano de Dio*** - The hand of God.

Meaning: A remarkable coincidence or unexpected event.

Use it when expressing surprise or gratitude for a fortunate occurrence.

Example: You're vacationing in Jerusalem and run into someone who lives in your neighborhood back in Seattle. "Is that you, Raphael Levi?? *La mano de Dio* !"

4. ***No ay kaza*** - There's no house.

Meaning: Something is impossible or nonexistent.

Use it when explaining that something can't be done

Example: You ask a shopkeeper, "Can you give me a better deal on these candlesticks?" Shopkeeper: " *No ay kaza* - this is the lowest price I can give you."

5. ***Por el amor de Dio*** - For the love of God.

Meaning: An expression of surprise, shock, or frustration

Use it when reacting to unexpected news or a surprising situation.

Example: You spill your Turkish coffee all over your white shirt right before a big meeting and say, "*Por el amor de Dio*!"

6. ***En la boka serada no entre la moshka*** - A fly doesn't enter a closed mouth.

Meaning: Don't spread gossip.

Use it when advising someone to keep quiet and avoid gossip.

Example: Your friend is the queen of gossip, and someone brings up some juicy gossip. You caution them, "*En la boka serada no entre la moshka*!"

7. ***Ah Dio!*** - Oh my God!

Meaning: An expression of surprise, shock, or excitement.

Use it when reacting to unexpected news or a surprising situation.

Example: "You're telling me that this Bar Mitzvah boy is the one I babysat when he was in diapers? Where has the time gone? *Ah dio*!"

8. **Kara de pepino** - Sourpuss

Meaning: Literally, "face of a pickle" i.e. someone with a sour or unpleasant expression.

Use it when teasing someone about their grumpy demeanor.

Example: "From the minute he woke up, he had a scowl on his face... he's such a *kara de pepino*!"

9. ***Echar lashon*** - To visit or talk

Meaning: Literally "to throw tongue," meaning casual conversation or gossip.

Use it when inviting someone to chat or catch up.

Example: You run into an old camp friend at the grocery store and exclaim, "*Echar lashon*! How have you been?"

Note: *Lashon* is Hebrew for "tongue."

10. ***Echar oju/ojo*** - Casting away the evil eye

Meaning: Casting away the evil spirits/evil eye (oju/ojo); equivalent to the Yiddish phrase *keynahora/k'ayn hara*

Use it when complimenting someone on their beauty or good fortune.

Example: Your baby niece's cheeks are so squishy and adorable! You exclaim, "Such a sweet little face, *echar oju*!"

Note: Rhodeslis say "oju," Turkinos use "ojo."

Embracing Ladino is more than just learning phrases; it's a gateway to reconnecting with a unique aspect of Jewish cultural heritage. Ladino carries the stories, traditions, and resilience of Sephardi communities. By incorporating Ladino into our everyday conversations, we can add depth and nuance to our expressions, connect with a global community, and honor the history of Sephardi Jews.

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