

## Jewish Dialogue

by Ben Nadler

When I was an undergraduate, Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" was often held up as a model of writing dialogue. The story consists mainly of a man and a woman arguing about whether she should get an abortion. As the piece is constructed largely of the two characters' directly reported dialogue, it provides a case study on the one element.

Years later, when I began teaching introductory creative writing courses, I brought "Hills" into my own classroom. However, not everyone found the story instructive. While some students felt that the couple's circumlocutory argument was reminiscent of conflicts they had observed or participated in, others simply found it baffling.

In an evening workshop in the South Bronx, I followed up the Hemingway story with an exercise where students had to construct a scene in which they hinted that a relative leave their home. One student finished the exercise almost immediately: "I would tell him," she said, "to get the hell out of my house."

Honestly, so would I. I learned a lot from "Hills," but as an East Coast American Jew, I am far more familiar with friendly conversations that sound like heated arguments than I am with heated arguments that sound like friendly conversations. Modes of spoken conversation are not culturally universal. It follows that modes of fictional dialogue are not universal either. As a Jewish writer, I am interested in the craft of Jewish dialogue.

Jewish English is most noted for its incorporation of non-English (Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, etc.) words. I took the multi-lingual richness of our prose for granted until, as an undergrad, I heard Salman Rushdie speak of the way reading Jewish American writers made him

feel like he had license to bring words from Hindi, Urdu, and other South Asian languages into English-language novels whose readers would be unfamiliar with the vocabulary.

But Jewish American speech patterns go well beyond vocabulary. Writing Jewish dialogue is not merely a matter of sprinkling a few “*baruch Hashems*” into dialogue which could otherwise be spoken by any American. In her influential 1981 article, “New York Jewish Conversational Style,” linguist Deborah Tannen argues that “the stereotype of the ‘pushy New York Jew’ may result in part from discourse conventions practiced by some native New Yorkers of East European Jewish backgrounds.” Although Tannen’s study is four decades old, her findings still ring true.

Tannen clarifies that “‘style’ is not something extra, added on like frosting on a cake,” but rather consists of foundational elements of speech. This distinction is important for fiction writers to remember: Style cannot be grafted onto dialogue after the fact; dialogue must build from style. The most distinctive feature of the New York Jewish conversational style Tannen identifies is “collaborative overlap.” She writes that “overlap is used cooperatively by the New Yorkers, as a way to show enthusiasm and interest, but it is interpreted by non-New Yorkers as just the opposite: evidence of a lack of attention.”

“Collaborative overlap” has structural implications for fictional dialogue. Dialogue is often seen as turn-taking between speakers, but the idea that one person speaks an entire thought, while the other person waits in silence, is very culturally-specific. As Matthew Salesses argues in his recent book *Craft in the Real World*, “craft is a set of expectations” and “expectations are not universal.”

Tannen identifies other features of the New York Jewish conversational style, such as topic (the inclusion of personal subject matter and the abrupt and insistent introduction of new

topics), pacing (speaking quickly and not leaving space between speakers), and genre (telling lots of stories and telling stories in round). All of these features relate to crafting fictional dialogue.

Grace Paley's 1972 story "A Conversation with my Father" is a masterwork of Jewish American dialogue. The Paley-like narrator argues with her immigrant father about her work. He challenges her to "write a simple story." Throughout the rest of the piece, daughter and father collaboratively construct and revise a story-within-a-story about a single mother on the Lower East Side. This evolving story is told again and again, in round, as details of the character's life change.

Both the inside story and the frame story refuse to come to a place of calm resolution. Even at the very end, the daughter and father still move rapidly back and forth, telling their own competing versions of the story.

"No, Pa, it could really happen that way, it's a funny word nowadays."

"No," he said, "Truth first. She will slide back. A person must have character. She does not."

"No, Pa," I said. "That's it. She's got a job. Forget it. She's in the storefront working."

"How long will it be?" He asked. "Tragedy! You too. When will you look it in the face?"

Even as the old man replenishes the air in his lung from an oxygen tank, he—like his daughter—breathlessly follows every statement offered to him with a "no." The last line lands with his abrupt switch to the personal.

This style of dialogue makes "A Conversation with my Father" a deeply Jewish story, despite the lack of overtly Jewish subject matter. Indeed, Jewish fiction is defined by form and craft as much as it is by content.