

# THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Left: Shmuel Lehman (centre), a collector of Jewish folklore, interviews members of the YIVO Folklore Collectors Circle, Warsaw, 1931; below: Russ and Daughters Cafe Zoom Seder attended by YIVO staff members

## LIFE DURING THE PANDEMIC

From prayers on Brooklyn porches to Zoom Passovers, Jewish communities are adapting to life with Covid-19. **Stefanie Halpern** reports on a new initiative that is telling their stories

**O**n a cold evening in early April 2020, a group of young Jews in Massachusetts gathers in a local street. They sit far apart from one another. They do not speak. As more individuals congregate, the group blocks the road. Approaching cars reverse, leaving them undisturbed. After a long stretch of silence, someone chants a song of mourning. Others join, forming a chorus of voices lamenting a friend who has died. This impromptu gathering may well be as close to traditional Jewish mourning practices as this group will get. Their grief is shared but, as one person observes, “Everything feels pointless if you can’t hug each other.”

This is just one of hundreds of stories gathered as part of an initiative at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research to document the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Jewish life. In April, YIVO created an online questionnaire asking participants to reflect on any new or modified Jewish activities in which they are now taking part. It also asked respondents to describe how the pandemic had impacted on their Passover customs. Shared on YIVO’s email list, social media platforms and website, the questionnaire has reached thousands of people around the

world. Responses have poured in from people of all ages and from as far afield as Columbia, New Zealand and Vietnam.

Like the Jews in Massachusetts, many respondents also report being unable to attend funerals or visit shiva houses, and share a similar feeling of isolation from Jewish life. One London participant writes, “Not being part of a community right now, not being able to go to the synagogue and being on our own without seeing a familiar face has been awful. We feel totally alone.”

Others bear witness to increased participation in communal activities, albeit remotely using platforms such as Zoom. A respondent in Montreal, Canada, observes, “It [the pandemic] has increased the presence that Jewish ritual and practice has in my life; I have almost completely

restructured my days to orient around marking time in a Jewish way.”

Above all, each story acknowledges that Jewish life has changed: from not being with family for the Passover Seder to keeping chametz [foods with leavening agents that are traditionally banned during Passover] in the house over Passover due to concerns about access to food, to gathering on porches to make a minyan (prayer quorum) three times a day, as reported by one person from a chasidic community in Brooklyn. Even the youngest respondent, an eight-year-old girl who filled out the form with the help of her older sister, is conscious of these changes: “We didn’t eat the same horseradish that Savta [grandma] makes. We used onion grass collected from the lawn. We ate a different matzah.” These responses provide insight into the ingenuity and resilience that has always defined aspects of Jewish life.

Gathering stories directly from the Jewish community has always been at the core of YIVO’s mission. Since the organisation began in 1925, YIVO has used questionnaires to collect material on everything from Jewish folk legends to holiday preparation to children’s games. Over the decades, YIVO appealed directly to the community, gathering youth autobiographies and oral histories that covered topics such as the experiences of Jewish soldiers, life during the Holocaust, and stories of migration.

Many of those who answered YIVO’s questionnaires in the 1920s didn’t think their stories were worth writing down so YIVO encouraged its zamlers (Yiddish for collectors) to explain that every response, no matter how similar, had certain variations that made it unique. Today, these sources form the core of YIVO’s collections and preserve a history that would have otherwise gone undocumented.

Collecting Jewish stories is as important now as it was a century ago. We encourage you to write down your experiences during the pandemic, from the seemingly trivial to the extraordinary, so they can be preserved for generations to come. ■

**Stefanie Halpern** is the Director of the YIVO Archives. Visit [yivo.org/share-your-story](http://yivo.org/share-your-story) to participate in the questionnaire.

