Rutgers prof explores 'breadth and richness of Yiddish culture'

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Eddy Portnoy's Yiddish career began when he was an inquisitive teenager, peppering his grandmother with questions on the language. His journey with the mame loshn has since brought him to the Rutgers University faculty and the pages of academic and popular publications.

In addition to teaching Yiddish language and Jewish culture at Rutgers, Portnoy writes a monthly column on Jewish history for Tablet magazine and his academic articles have appeared in The Drama Review, Polin, and The International Journal of Comic Art.

"When I was an early teenager, I took an interest in Yiddish," Portnoy told The Jewish State. Portnoy described how he would follow his grandmother on errands and have her explain how to say things in Yiddish, which he then compiled into a lexicon, gradually building his vocabulary. He continued to study the language on his own, though it was not until after college that he was exposed to the "breadth and richness of Yiddish culture."

After graduating from Boston University, Portnoy worked at a publishing company that, for a project, had partnered with the YIVO Institute, a leading center for the study of Yiddish and Eastern European Jewish history. Zachary Baker, who was the senior librarian at YIVO at the time, convinced him to enroll in YIVO's Yiddish summer program held at Columbia University.

"I took the program and I was hooked," Portnoy recalled. He subsequently enrolled in the Yiddish graduate program at Columbia University, completing his master's, and then continued his studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, from where he received his Ph.D. in modern Jewish studies in 2008. In the fall of 2008, Portnoy joined Rutgers University, where he teaches Yiddish language as well as classes on modern Jewish culture.

Now in his second year at Rutgers, Portnoy said that the students enrolled in the Yiddish language classes come from a diverse range of backgrounds, including several non-Jews who are either interested in Jewish culture or linguistics. Portnoy said that it is satisfying to be able to provide an opportunity to students that he himself did not have as an undergraduate.

"If I had seen it offered, I would have jumped at it," he said.

In his academic and popular writings, Portnoy strays from the conventional topics of Jewish scholarship that tend to focus on ideas and movements propagated by Jewish elite.

"People who go into academia are intellectuals who are generally interested in other intellectuals and academicians as they leave a paper trail," he said.

Instead, Portnoy focuses on the neglected stories of everyday Jewish life and culture, with topics ranging from the emergence of Jewish wrestlers in inter-war Poland to the topic of his dissertation, cartoons of the Yiddish press.

Portnoy explained that Yiddish cartoons provide a rich source of information about Jewish life at the time, and that the research involved in analyzing these documents is not much different from how scholars use any other text.

"I analyze it seriously, trying to excavate the references," he said. "It is similar in a way to analyzing a painting or a piece of literature."

In the course of his research, Portnoy was struck by the way these cartoonists appropriated traditional Jewish texts and metaphors to comment upon contemporary political and social topics. For Portnoy, this phenomenon suggests that when discussing the life of Yiddish-speaking Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one cannot make a strict separation between religious and secular.

To come up with new subjects to write about, Portnoy spends hours scanning the microfilm of Yiddish publications, which he described as a productive, yet difficult endeavor.

"One of the great things about doing that is that you see a headline that catches your eye, like a Jewish tattoo artist from the 1920s, which while not necessarily common, was something that was known," he said.

While scholarly interest in popular culture has been around in earnest since the 1970s, Portnoy explained that this trend has been slower to reach the field of Jewish studies.

"In the last five, maybe 10 years, there has been a broadening in the range of what is studied," he said. "Jewish studies is much more conservative than other fields."

Portnoy said that in recent years, prominent scholars have investigated such topics as Yiddish radio and Jewish food, which he considers a positive development for the field.

"Any part of the Jewish experience should be open for research," Portnoy said.