5 Yiddish Words You Need to Know

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BESHERT

The Jewish cosmic connection

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The Jewish cosmic connection

THE TERM BESHERT can refer to any fortuitous event ("I missed the bus, but it must have been *beshert*, because I heard it broke down"), it's most often used to mean a soulmate: the one person whom an individual is divinely destined to marry. The etymology of the Yiddish word—spelled, generally, either *bashert* or *beshert*—is something of a mystery. Some argue that the word comes from the German beschert, meaning bestowed or given. (*Bescherung*, a version of the word, is used to describe the exchange of gifts on Christmas.) Others say that it's from the Yiddish word *sher*, meaning scissors or shears, the idea being that *beshert* is something that has been shaped in a specific way, as if cut out by a pair of unseen scissors.

The concept of a soulmate is nothing new, or uniquely Jewish. In *The Symposium*, Plato has Aristophanes present the idea that humans originally had four arms, four legs and one head made of two faces; Zeus split these creatures in half, leaving each torn creature to search for its missing counterpart. The widely used kismet—a Turkish derivation of the Arabic word *qisma*, meaning lot or portion—originated as the version of fate in the Arab world.

The Jewish theory of soulmates has its roots in that most romantic of canonical texts: the Talmud. The sage Rav stip-

ulates that "40 days before the formation of a child, a heavenly voice issues forth and proclaims, the daughter of this person is for that person; the house of this person is for that person; the field of this person is for that person." This declaration is considered the origin of the idea of the soulmate in Judaism, although it is also discussed elsewhere, including Kabbalah, which teaches that husband and wife are *plag nishamasa*, or "half-souls." The 13th-century scholar Nachmanides—echoing Plato's themes—writes that when a soul is about to be born, God splits it in half, to be fully united in marriage.

Some rabbinic scholars take exception with what seems to be a negation of free will. Maimonides rejects outright the concept of a fated match: "If a person marries a woman, granting her a marriage contract and performing the rites of *kiddushin*, he is performing a mitzvah, and God does not decree that we will perform any mitzvot." The disagreement reflects a deeper undercurrent in Jewish theology: the conflicting tenets of free will and divine providence. How much of our life's path is God's decree, and how much is the consequence of personal choice? "That tension pops up in a lot of different elements" of Judaism, says Josh Yuter, an Orthodox rabbi in New York who has written about the religious debates over *beshert*. "There's a passage that says everything is in the hands of heaven except hot and cold; if you go out in winter without a jacket, it's not God's fault you catch a cold." Likewise, scholars debate whether marriage is the result of a divine plan, or individual choice and persistence.

Some sources say there is a variation on *beshert* known as *zivug*, translating roughly to partner. The scholar Rashi maintains that a *zivug* is determined based on the quality of

one's deeds; a life better-lived will earn one a better pairing. Others say that there is a first *zivug* and a second *zivug*, and that a person might have two matches for various reasons. Rashi's grandson, the 12th-century rabbinic authority Rabbeinu Tam, contends that a second *zivug* applies only to widows and widowers, and that a person's husband or wife might die early if another righteous person deserves the widow or widower as their own spouse.

The term *beshert* found deeper resonance after the 18th century, when romantic love and compatibility began to replace marriages arranged on the basis of money and social standing. The question of arranged marriages versus chosen ones emerged as a major literary theme among Hebrew and Yiddish works of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, says Naomi Seidman, professor of Jewish culture at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. At issue in many of these texts is whether being fated to be with someone means "your souls are uniquely fitted together, or that what will happen was predicted" regardless of the quality of the union, says Seidman.

One writer who fought against the infallibility of *beshert* was Lithuanian-born 19th-century poet Judah Leib Gordon. Gordon is most celebrated for his long, satirical poem "The Tip of the Yud," a mock epic in which he decries the status of women in Jewish culture. In the poem, Batshua's unloving husband, Hillel, abandons her without a proper divorce. When Batshua falls in love with Fabi, Hillel is coerced into giving her a get, but a rabbi decrees the document null and void, saying that Hillel's written name is missing a letter—a yud, giving the poem its name. "The way [*beshert*] is used in Gordon's poem is you were fated to marry this person; if he's a jerk, if it's to-

tally incompatible, it doesn't matter," says Seidman. "Gordon is very antagonistic to the notion of *beshert*. He thinks it takes away modern notions like compatibility."

Today, *beshert* has come to encompass compatibility. In contemporary parlance, it means a love match that may take hard work—and perhaps a little help—to find. Among myriad dating websites, the Orthodox-centric Saw You At Sinai uses old-fashioned matchmaking techniques to set up religious singles. The website, whose name comes from the teaching that all living and yet-to-be-born Jewish souls were present at Sinai when the Torah was given, uses matchmakers. Tova Weinberg, the site's lead matchmaker, estimates that in 35 years she's organized more than 200 marriages. She dismisses the notion of one *beshert*. "I believe a girl can marry 200 boys and be perfectly happy, and a boy can marry 200 girls." An overly fervent belief in *beshert*, Weinberg says, contributes to the quixotic search for the elusive perfect person. "A lot of singles are unrealistic about who they are and what they can get, and this focus on *beshert* is killing them," says Weinberg, emphasizing that personal responsibility and initiative are key, and echoing another Jewish precept: marriage—even to the right person—is hard work. "You make your life; you can make yourself miserable, or you can make yourself have a good life."

—Sala Levin

GLITCH

A Yiddish Word Goes Galactic

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A Yiddish Word Goes Galactic

TECHNOLOGY INEXPLICABLY FAILS us often enough to need a word for the occasion, and remarkably the Yiddish word glitch has slipped in to fill the void. Newspaper headlines routinely illustrate the word's versatility and popularity. When thousands of travelers find themselves stranded: "Computer glitch cancels East Coast flights." When a much-anticipated website launch screeches to a halt: "HealthCare.gov's glitches prompt Obama to call in more computer experts." When a casual drugstore purchase racks up an outsize debit statement: "Walgreens' glitch causes two charges."

We take glitch for granted now, but it wasn't always this way. On September 3, 1976, when the Viking 2 successfully alighted on Mars after a communications failure, the *St. Petersburg Times* ran the headline, "Viking II lands with glitch." The word baffled enough subscribers to prompt the newspaper to publish two columns in explanation. One helpful reader, Rabbi Louis M. Lederman, called in to offer this accounting: The word came from Yiddish, meaning to slip or slide.

Unlike other Yiddishisms that populate the American lexicon, glitch doesn't particularly sound like something your bubbe

would say. But Yiddishist Michael Wex, author of *Born to Kvetch*, says glitshn means to slip on ice or to go skating. "Normally it's, you know, I went outside in November and I—*ikh hob zikh a glitsh geton*. I slid on the ice, but managed to keep my balance," he says. "You slip. You don't necessarily fall." Wex reports that Yiddish-speaking children in Eastern Europe who slid down snow-covered hills were particularly fond of a move called the *vayoymer Dovd glitsh* or the "and David said slide." Adopting the posture of the *tachanun* prayer, from whose first line the name is taken, they would lower their faces to their forearms before embarking, blind, on their slippery descent. (The prayer is also known as the *nefilat apayim*, or "falling on the face.")

When Rabbi Lederman called the Florida newsroom in 1976, he had a theory for how glitch had gone galactic. "I suspect that a Jewish engineer in a space laboratory once referred offhand to some problem with a space vehicle as a 'glitch,'" he said, "and the expression just caught on." This explanation hewed pretty closely to the best available knowledge of glitch's provenance at the time: a 1972 entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where the earliest citation of the word dated back to astronaut John Glenn's 1962 account of Project Mercury. According to Glenn, he and the other astronauts adopted the term to describe a transitory technical issue. "Literally," he wrote in *Into Orbit*, "a glitch is a spike or change in voltage in an electrical circuit which takes place when the circuit suddenly has a new load put on it."

Unbeknownst to Glenn, this was not the first adaptation of the word in a technical context, which likely occurred in the golden age of radio. In 1980, the late William Safire wrote about the word in his "On Language" column in *The New*

York Times, and received a letter in response from the actor Tony Randall, recalling that he'd heard the word in 1941 when he landed an announcer gig at a radio station in Worcester, Massachusetts. "The older announcers told me the term had been used as long as they could remember," he wrote, to refer to such errors as putting on the wrong record or reading the wrong commercial. (These mistakes were chronicled on a mimeographed "Glitch Sheet.")

It's easy to see how the Yiddish word would have made its way into radio studios. In the early days, the airwaves were filled with Yiddish speakers. Henry Sapoznik, a Yiddish historian and sound archivist, has tallied 186 stations between 1924 and 1955 that carried Yiddish programming. "To get Yiddish radio, I mean, all you had to do was to turn the dial a half an inch in one direction or the other," he says. As a new medium in need of a new vernacular, radio repurposed and reimagined terminology. There were invented words, such as "kilocycle," and borrowed ones, such as "broadcast"—taken from agriculture, Sapoznik explains, where it referred to the casting of seeds in a field. A Yale law librarian named Fred Shapiro dates the first printed record of glitch's radio pedigree to a 1940 syndicated newspaper column by novelist Katharine Brush. She wrote: "When the radio talkers make a little mistake in diction, they call it a 'fluff,' and when they make a bad one they call it a 'glitch,' and I love it."

Linguist and lexicographer Ben Zimmer uncovered the missing link between radio and space during the HealthCare.gov debacle, penning a column on the subject in *The Wall Street Journal*. Before taking on cosmic significance, glitch passed through television. Zimmer found a 1955 Bell Telephone ad in *Billboard* describing the company argot: "And

when he talks of ‘glitch’ with a fellow technician, he means a low frequency interference which appears as a narrow horizontal bar moving vertically through the picture.” A 1959 trade magazine piece about tape-splicing explains: “‘Glitch’ is slang for the ‘momentary jiggle’ that occurs at the editing point if the sync pulses don’t match exactly in the splice.”

Zimmer delights in the historical happenstance. “Glitch becomes entrenched among radio technicians, then television technicians, and then space technicians, and then computer technicians,” he says. Most of its existence, he adds, has been “under the radar as this technical term.” But no longer. Thanks to the ubiquity of crashing computers and freezing smartphone screens, the word has even inspired an artistic style that embraces error as an aesthetic ideal. But its Yiddish root is subtle enough that it often falls victim to the “backronym”—an apocryphal acronym retroactively applied to a word of mysterious origin. Such gems include “Gremlins Loose In The Computer Hut” and “Gremlins Lurking In The Computer Hardware.” Says Zimmer: “People have a lot of fun trying to explain where things come from.”

—Anna Isaacs

SECHEL

The Jewish Sixth Sense

SECHEL

The Jewish Sixth Sense

IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *Songs My Mother Taught Me,* Marlon Brando writes at length about the transformative role Jews played in his personal development in the 1940s. At the conclusion of his tribute to Jews and Judaism, Brando tries to reduce what is special about Jews to a single word: *sechel*. “There’s a Yiddish word, *seychel* [sic], that provides a key explaining the most profound aspects of Jewish culture,” he says. “It means to pursue knowledge and to leave the world a better place than when you entered it… It must be this cultural tradition that accounts for their amazing success, along with Judaism, the one constant that survived while the Jews were dispersed around the world.” With these words, Brando tapped deep into the multi-layered meanings of the word *sechel*, a word that is as old as the Jewish people and plays a key role in the moral and cultural conceptions of Jewish life.

Sechel is both a Hebrew and a Yiddish word, the Hebrew meanings having been absorbed into Yiddish. Pronounced *sekhel* in Modern/Israeli Hebrew and *seykhel* in Yiddish, it can mean intelligence, smarts, brains, reason, common sense, cleverness or even wisdom. *Sechel* is defined in the authoritative *Eben Shoshan Hebrew Dictionary* as “the spiritual ability to think, to weigh, the strength to judge and to

come to a resolution." Michael Swirsky, an Israel-based educator and translator of Hebrew texts, distinguishes *sechel* from *chochma*, and other Hebrew words for wisdom, as "a trait, like IQ or good sense" that one is endowed with. "*Chochma*, *binah* and *da'at*," Swirsky explains, "are skills, talents or traits that could take a lifetime to acquire."

At home in many a Yiddish proverb, *sechel* is generally considered to be an enviable quality. A typical piece of advice: "With a horse you look at the teeth; with a person, you look at their *sechel*." Another: "For money you get everything except sechel." Or: "Ask advice from everyone, but act with your own *sechel*." However, it often is used as a not-so-subtle negative jibe. In his 2008 book, *Just Say Nu: Yiddish for Every Occasion When English Just Won't Do*, Michael Wex notes with not a small touch of irony that "Yiddish is blessed with a wealth of expressions to describe anyone less intelligent than the speaker," including such gems as "She has as many brains (*saykhl*) as a church has mezuzahs!"

Contemporary use of *sechel*, however, gives little hint of the more serious moral and ethical undercurrents of the word in religious texts. *Sechel*, and related forms of the term such as *maskil* and *l'haskil*, appear more than a hundred times in the Bible. *Sechel* first appears in the third chapter of Genesis, when Eve comments that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is "desirable as a means to wisdom [*l'haskil*]." Here the Bible introduces the moral lesson that wisdom can be used for good or for evil, a theme found in later Jewish texts as well.

There are, however, numerous biblical references to *sechel* that foreshadow its contemporary use as "common sense"

linked to action. When Jacob intentionally switches his right and left hands in order to give Ephraim, rather than Manasseh, the blessing of the first-born, the word describing this maneuver is *seekhayl*. In another example, Avigail, whose husband insults King David's men, tries to appease the king with a bounty of gifts and is described in the text as a woman "of good understanding," *v'ha-isha tovat sechel*.

Sechel is also the root of *haskalah*, the Hebrew word meaning enlightenment, and the name of the 18th- and 19th-century movement that introduced European Jewry to secular ideas and society. As a result, traditionalist religious leaders associated *sechel* and its derivatives with apostasy. To the *maskilim*, or enlightened ones, *sechel* meant ridding Jews of superstitions and stultifying old ways, according to Jack Kugelmass, a Jewish studies professor at the University of Florida. Kugelmass adds that *sechel* no longer carries these connotations—were he to use the word *sechel* in class today, his fourth- and fifth-generation students wouldn't know what he is talking about.

Despite this, plenty of people continue to find *sechel* useful. It keeps popping up in some unexpected places. A rather curious example is *Sechel: Logic Language and Tools to Manage Any Organization as a Network*, an organizational management manual by a non-Jewish business strategist named Domenico Lepore. Lepore explains that intuitive insights derived from the study of Chabad Hasidism led him to identify various "faculties" of intellect to improve organization performance. "Only with an acquired *sechel*," Lepore explains, "is it possible to manage successfully a conscious and connected organization, one that recognizes the systemic, network and project-like intrinsic nature of the work of any enterprise."

Why hasn't *sechel* entered the English lexicon, like many other commonly used Yiddish words, such as mensch or chutzpah? "*Sechel* has not been commonly used for several decades by Jews in their interactions with non-Jews," says Sarah Bunin Benor, professor of contemporary Jewish studies at Hebrew Union College and creator of the online "Jewish English Lexicon," which contains 855 words from Yiddish, Hebrew and other languages used by American Jews within English. One explanation may be that in contrast to words like mensch and chutzpah, which have no simple equivalent in English, the principal meanings of *sechel*—common sense and wisdom—are fully captured in English. There are those who would say that the world is in desperate need of sechel, whatever language it is expressed in. Says Yiddish *scholar* and Harvard professor Ruth Wisse: "Three things always come too late—wisdom [*sechel*], regret and the fire brigade."

—George E. Johnson

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This Yiddish word says it best

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TSURIS

This Yiddish word says it best

“NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’ve seen,” laments an African-American spiritual. In Yiddish, this feeling is encapsulated by the word tsuris—variously defined as troubles, worries, aggravation, woes, suffering, grief or heartache. In other words, “tsuris is what nudniks have and are only too willing to share with others,” according to the *Everyday Yiddish-English Dictionary.* The online *Urban Dictionary* calls it “a Yiddish phrase for worries, stress or hassle,” giving this example: “Oy, Zelda, I don’t want to be a kvetch, but I’ve got tsuris up to here.”

Tsuris is a Yiddish word, but its root is the Hebrew *tzarah,* meaning trouble; its relative, *litzrot,* means to become narrow or to be in a tight place, says Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York, a longtime student of Yiddish and a former assistant director of the National Yiddish Book Center. Leo Rosten, writing in *The Joys of Yiddish*, points out that the singular of tsuris is *tsorah* or *tsureh.* Adds Kleinbaum: “What is interesting is that tsuris does not really exist in the singular, because Jews don’t do trouble in the singular. It has to be in the plural.”

The word is used liberally in connection with illness, money woes, relationships and especially children. The expression, “Don’t give me any tsuris!” is timeless, as is the story of

the proverbial four women sitting on a porch in a Catskill hotel: "*Oy,*" says the first woman. "*Oy vey*," says the second. "*Oy vez iz mir*," sighs the third. "I thought we weren't going to talk about our children today," snaps the fourth woman. That's tsuris—a feeling so pervasive it need not be named. There might not be another word in any language that quite captures the meaning of tsuris. It's less existential than angst, the Danish word philosopher Søren Kierkegaard used to describe anguish or outright anxiety, which he defined as unfocused fear or terror in the face of limitless freedom. (The shrieking man in Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* is consumed with angst, not tsuris.) But tsuris treads deeper than *shpilkes*, a Yiddish word that literally translates as needles and describes a feeling of nervous energy. (*Shpilkes* means "sitting on pins and needles" or having "ants in one's pants" and is akin to the feeling of butterflies in your stomach before a job interview or an important meeting.) And tsuris definitely isn't *fardeiget,* a far less-known Yiddish word that means worried or distressed.

Tsuris pops up frequently, even outside of strictly Jewish circles. When Senator Daniel Inouye died recently, columnist Douglas Bloomfield wrote in an obituary in *The Forward* that Inouye had told him he had considered converting to Judaism but joked that he didn't "because being Japanese and having only one arm, he had enough 'tsuris.'" In a 2011 article on President Barack Obama and Israel called "The Tsuris" in *New York Magazine*, the author John Heilemann argues that "Obama unleashed a tsunami of tsuris" among the Jewish community because of his Israel policies. The word also made an appearance in the 1997 movie *Wag the Dog,* where a character complains, "I don't need this gig. I don't need the money. I don't need the tsuris."

Surprisingly, tsuris hasn't been absorbed into everyday American English as readily as Yiddish words such as maven, or chutzpah or kvetch. Non-Yiddish-speaking Jews and non-Jews don't always recognize it immediately. The late conservative columnist and grammarian James J. Kilpatrick, for example, was aggravated when he came across the word in a *Newsday* article, prompting him to write a 1988 column on "The Writer's Art:" "Tsuris?" he asked. "What in the devil is tsuris?" He finally found the word in the *American Heritage College* dictionary and *Random House Unabridged*, discovering that "spelled *tsores*, it appears in the 1986 supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* where its first usage is dated from 1901."

Sometimes tsuris requires an adjective for more oomph: In an article in the *National Review* in 1987, D. Keith Mann said, "If I were an American mother, I'd worry more about drugs in my children's schools and drunk driving and AIDS and a million other problems, *gehocte tsuris*." Leo Rosten spells this phrase *gehokteh tsuris*, defining it as "chopped-up," although he complains, "Why troubles are worsened when chopped up, like chicken liver, I do not know, but the phrase certainly *sounds* authoritative."

Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz may assign far too much importance to tsuris in his book *The Vanishing American Jew*. In his "Tsuris Theory of Jewish Survival," he posits that historically "Jews have retained their Jewish identity, at least in part, because of tsuris." But as external threats diminish, Dershowitz contends that tsuris can no longer be relied on to maintain Jewish continuity. Who knew a tsuris-free world could be such a problem?

—*Eileen Lavine*

ZAFTIG

A Full-Bodied History

ZAFTIG

A Full-Bodied History

FOR A QUICK OVERVIEW of the complexities of the word *zaftig*, take a look at the Los Angeles Jewish Home's video circulating online in which its residents demystify the meaning of the word. Charlotte Seeman says that *zaftig* means "a little bit on the heavy side," to which the moderator, Marty Finkelstein, asks, "But in a good way?" "They look a little, if you'll pardon the expression, appetizing to other people," adds Yetta Dorfman. Esther Berlin is less effusive. "It's a shame because they don't take care of themselves and do something about it," she says, prompting the chivalrous gentleman of the group, Irving Rubinstein, to defend the *zaftig* dame's honor. "It's kind of a sexy, plump, attractive woman," he concludes.

That, in a nutshell, is the debate over *zaftig*. By most contemporary definitions, *zaftig* means voluptuous or sexily curvaceous à la Marilyn Monroe or the commanding office manager Joan Harris on *Mad Men*. Unless it is a polite way of saying fat, in an unsexy way. "It holds both [meanings] depending upon who says it," says Lori Lefkovitz, professor of Jewish studies at Northeastern University.

But in traditional Yiddish, *zaftig* has nothing to do with women's bodies. It comes from the German word *saftig*, mean-

ing "juicy" or "succulent" (*saft* in German means "juice" or "sap"), and in European Yiddish, in which it is spelled and pronounced *zaftik*, was used to describe food and taste. But it could also be used for more abstract depictions of ideas, says Eddy Portnoy, who teaches Yiddish language and literature at Rutgers University. "You can have a *zaftik* story, you can have a *zaftik* piece of gossip, virtually anything that fits the bill," he says. "It's a very commonly used modifier that can refer to anything that is rich or pleasing," much the same way an American might tell a friend that she heard some juicy news at the water cooler.

So how did *zaftig* make the transition to women? It is likely another example of the common transition that occurs with the Americanization of Yiddish. "We do that a lot with women's bodies—we talk about juicy bodies and succulent bodies," says Lefkovitz. "We describe women as food because they're edible, they're delicious."

Sexual undertones are often implicit in the word's use. Leo Rosten affectionately exclaimed that the word "describes in one word what takes two hands, outlining an hourglass figure, to do," in his classic 1968 book *The Joys Of Yiddish*. Says Yiddish expert Michael Wex, who defined the word in *Just Say Nu: Yiddish For Every Occasion (When English Just Won't Do)*: "The best equivalent I ever found for *zaftig* was an old cigarette commercial for Lucky Strike; the Lucky Strike model is 'so round, so firm, so fully packed.' That immediately took on a secondary meaning, a sexual connotation. *Zaftig* might—I can't say for sure—in that sense have been influenced by that." Others have been even more explicit in the erotic implications of *zaftig*; Hanne Blank, editor of the 2001 anthology *Zaftig: Well-Rounded Erotica*, says that she

chose the word for the title in part because "*zaftig* sounds like something that's enjoyable, like something you can have a good time with, where plus-size sounds like you lost your way in Kmart and ended up in the plus-size section."

Our changing perceptions of female beauty have influenced the use of the word. "Once upon a time, plumpness or curviness and all of those luscious sexual descriptors were associated with health and wealth, and as health and wealth got increasingly thin, *zaftig* became a euphemism for overweight," says Lefkovitz.

Harvard professor Marjorie Garber touched on the word's ambiguity in her essay "Moniker," which was compiled in the 2001 book of essays *Our Monica, Ourselves*, dissecting what she argues some saw as Monica Lewinsky's inherently Jewish seductive qualities. To Monica's critics, "She was 'pushy'; she was 'ambitious'; she was '*zaftig*'; she was 'typical Beverly Hills.' She was physically mature for her age. She was sexy and seductive…She led a weak Christian man astray."

What accounts for the word's seemingly unflagging presence in American English? For one thing, as with so many Yiddish words, there's no exact equivalent in English. The closest may be "pleasantly plump" or "Rubenesque," after the women depicted in the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens—but neither has the zing of *zaftig*. Lefkovitz suggests that another reason is its nostalgic evocation. "It's a word where we hold both the past and the present, where there was a kind of valorization even for our *zaftig* grandmothers."

The word is popular among non-Jews, too. When it came to

choosing a name for his brewery, it didn't matter to Brent Halsey whether his patrons would appreciate the double entendre of Zaftig Brewing Company. "None of us three co-owners are Jewish, but [the word] left a mark on me," he said, citing as inspiration his high school English teacher's penchant for quoting *The Joys Of Yiddish*. For a brewery specializing in full-bodied ales, it seemed the most fitting choice.

—Hilary Weissman, with additional reporting by Sala Levin

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