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Rich Sloane
University of Central Florida

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Wipe That Schmutz Off Your Face- and Keep Reading

By Rich Sloane
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, February 19, 2014

There it was in the *New York Times*: schmutz.

In [an article](#) on the efficacy of raising the height of the Bayonne Bridge connecting New York's Staten Island with New Jersey, no less a maven than the executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey made a point by stating: "The environmental impact is more energy-efficient ships. They will emit less schmutz per container and per pair of Nikes."

Less schmutz per container? I mean, once you get west of the Hudson River, how many people know what schmutz is? Well, probably more people than ever, thanks to the broadening that has come from late night television. But it brought to mind the expanding nature of Yiddish into the American dialect.

For some time, I've watched the increasing use in highly respected newspapers, periodicals, situation comedies and other avenues of communication, words of Yiddish origin whose definitions were known to me because of my heritage, a line that stretches from Eastern Europe to the western tip of Long Island.

I love seeing Yiddish show up in the media. It gives me a feeling of being part of something that others want in on. I feel special because I know this "second language" that not many others do, and it makes me feel closer to my heritage.

Sometimes you can guess the meaning of these strange and often guttural-sounding words by the context in which they are used, in much the same way you might grasp the

meaning of an English language word with which you were not familiar. But more often than not, the meaning is undecipherable and some of them have crept into our daily language.

Let me first stipulate that the following examples constitute one person's understanding of the words. There were, after all, 12 tribes of Israel, and each must have had its own lexicon.

Each of the following definitions first contains my personal understanding and, in some cases, additional input from other references.

Here are some words you can use in mixed company:

Maven — Rhymes with raven (and was used in the first paragraph above). An expert, as viewed by others. Or, if you're feeling catty: "What makes him think he's a maven?"

Mensch — Rhymes with bench. A man of high moral character, one who does the right thing. "He stood up to that bully, bailed his cousin Morty out of jail, and rescued a puppy on the way home; what a mensch."

Mishugana — Rhymes with nothing (just keep pronouncing it differently each time, and eventually you'll hit upon it. But if you're in a hurry, lessons are \$50 an hour, cheap at twice the price!). Definition — crazy, nuts. "She drove from New York to Miami straight through without stopping; she's mishugana."

Shlemiel — Someone who tends to make the wrong decisions or ruin everything, such as a waiter who spills a whole bowl of matzo ball soup on a customer.

Shlemazel — Someone who always has bad luck, such as the customer upon whom the waiter spills a bowl of soup.

Chutzpah — Guttural at its finest ("chu, chu, chu," come on now, you can do it, like you've got a chicken bone stuck in your throat). Full of nerve, in a bad way. "Telling the rabbi he had his yarmulke on backwards took a lot of chutzpah."

There's also some words you shouldn't use in mixed company. But let's just leave well enough alone. Suffice it to say, you'll know the meaning of these words when you hear them. If you happen to be in midtown Manhattan traffic at noon, just roll your window down and listen for the nearest cabby, regardless of ethnicity, to hear some of the words. Sometimes they're accompanied by a hand gesture, but more often by a sneer. Oftentimes a good "curse" wished upon someone can be more effective than a slur: "May you grow like an onion, with your head in the ground!"

There are as many different interpretations and interpreters of words stemming from Yiddish as there are stars in the heavens. Let no one claim to be the expert, a maven if you will. But rather let each unto his or her own past look for the true meaning of words and hope that they will lead to true understanding.

Oh, by the way: schmutz is dirt or something else that needs to be wiped away, such as a bit of cream cheese stuck on the corner of your mouth. "Here, my darling grandchild, so intelligent, so beautiful, let me get that schmutz off your face."

Rich Sloane is director of community relations for the University of Central Florida's College of Education and Human Performance. He can be reached at Rich.Sloane@ucf.edu.