

**STANDARD TRANSLITERATION OF YIDDISH**

by

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## Introduction

Transliteration is a system of representing the sounds of Yiddish by letters of the Roman alphabet. It has become the *lingua franca* that connects Yiddish-lovers at various levels of skill in Yiddish: those who are expert in reading, writing, and speaking Yiddish use transliteration (for example, on the blog *Mendele* and in our own *Der Bay*) to speed up and simplify communication among themselves without having to write cursive Yiddish or type Yiddish with letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which is still a slow, complicated process even with modern computers; those whose ability to read Yiddish in its original alphabet is poor but who understand the language reasonably well become, through the use of transliteration, able to read Yiddish as freely as their more learned colleagues can. They are also able to transmit Yiddish messages of their own quickly and easily. The only basic requirement for using transliteration is knowledge of what the Yiddish words sound like (some words are derived from Hebrew and the sound cannot be readily figured out from the spelling.)

Learning the rules of transliteration is simple and quick--anyone can become an expert in half an hour. However, to facilitate mutual understanding we must use a standard transliteration rather than an everyone-for-himself (or herself) transliteration, by analogy to the written standard Yiddish (*klal-yidish*) that is now used in magazines, newspapers, and books by all educated Yiddish-speakers regardless of their individual spoken dialects. This presentation will teach the listeners the standard rules so that they too can become experts in this useful technique.

## A. Letters of the Transliteration Alphabet

### 1. Simple Vowels

#### Sound

a

Always like “o” in “not”;  
Example: *tate* (father).

e

Always like “e” in “extra”;  
Example: “*elf*” (eleven).  
(Note: never silent. When it is written at the end of a word (such as “*tate*”, the “e” is always sounded—it is not necessary and not correct to follow it with an “h” to show that it is sounded.  
Example: “*hagode*,” not “*hagodeh*.”

i

Two possible sounds:

hard, like “ee” in “feet”;  
Example: “*glid*” (limb).

soft, like “i” in “hit”;  
Example: “*mishn*” (to mix).

At the end of a word or before a vowel (even another “i”), always pronounced hard;

Examples: “*mi*” (effort)  
“*fri*” (early)  
“*tsion*” (Zion)  
“*gliik*” (glowing)

Before a consonant, may be pronounced either hard or soft,  
Examples: (hard first, then soft):

before “b” “*fiber*” (fever)  
“*fintster*” (dark)

before “d” “*mid*” (weary)  
“*niderik*” (low)

before “f” “*tif*” (deep)  
“*shif*” (ship)

before “g” “*tsigl*” (brick)  
“*lign*” (lie)

before “k” “*mikh*” (me)  
“*shikn*” (to send)

before “l” “*tsil*” (goal)  
“*mild*” (gentle)

before “m” “*bime*” (platform)  
“*tsimer*” (room)

before “n” “*diner*” (servant)  
“*diner*” (thinner)  
(two words spelled the same but  
pronounced differently)

before “p” “*kipa*” (yarmulke)  
“*lipn*” (lips)

before “r” “*firn*” (to lead)  
“*lirish*” (lyrical)

before “s” “*mister*” (ugliest)  
“*flister*” (whisper)

before “t” “*gegli*” (glowed)  
“*tsiter*” (tremble)

before “v” “*bekivn*” (deliberately)  
“*farglivert*” (frozen)

before “z” “*piza*” (Pisa)  
“*iz*” (is)

o

Always like “u” in “nut”;  
Example: “*hobn*” (to have)

u

Two possible sounds:

hard, like “oo” in “boot”

Example: “*tsufridn*” (satisfied);

soft, like “oo” in “foot”

Example: “*puter*” (butter)

## 2. Compound vowels:

ay

Like “ay” in “aye, aye”;

Example: “*fayer*” (fire)

ey

Like “ey” in “hey!”;

Example: “*eyder*” (before)

oy

Like “oy” in “Oy, vey!”

Example: “*froy*” (woman)

## 3. Simple Consonants:

b, d, f, h, k, l, m,  
n, p, r, s, t, v, z

As in English

c

Not used in transliteration; it’s  
“soft” sound is represented by  
“s” and its hard sound by “k”

g

Always hard, as in “gone”; the  
sound of “soft g”, usually in  
foreign words, is represented  
either by “dzh” or “zh” (see pages  
6 and 7)

<b>j</b>	<b>Not used in transliteration; in foreign words with that sound, use “dzh”;</b> <b><u>Example:</u> “<i>dzhimi</i>” (Jimmy)</b>
<b>q</b>	<b>Not used in transliteration; in foreign words with that sound, use “kv” instead;</b> <b><u>Example:</u> “<i>kvin elizabet</i>”</b>
<b>w</b>	<b>Not used in transliteration; in foreign words with that sound, use “v” instead;</b> <b><u>Example:</u> “<i>kvalitet</i>” (quality)</b>
<b>x</b>	<b>Not used in transliteration; in words with that sound, use “ks” instead;</b> <b><u>Example:</u> “<i>oks</i>” (ox)</b>

#### **4. Compound Consonants**

<b>ch</b>	<b>Not used in transliteration, except to transliterate a proper name or a rare foreign word spelled with it;</b> <b><u>Examples:</u> “<i>Bach</i>” (pronounced “bakh”) and “<i>dacha</i>” (country cottage), (pronounced “datsha”)</b>
<b>dzh</b>	<b>Represents the sound of “j” or soft “g” in foreign words or names;</b> <b><u>Example:</u> “<i>dzhimi</i>” (Jimmy) “<i>dzherald</i>” (Gerald)</b>

kh	Represents the guttural sound that is represented in German by “ch”; do not use “ch” for that sound in transliteration; <u>Example:</u> “ <i>ikh</i> ”(I), not “ <i>ich</i> ”
sh	Like “sh” in “push”; represents the sound of “shin” in Yiddish; <u>Example:</u> “ <i>tsvishn</i> ” (between)
ts	Like “ts” in “cats”; represents the letter “tsadik” in Yiddish; <u>Example:</u> “ <i>tsuker</i> ” (sugar)
tsh	Like “ch” in “cherry”; <u>Example:</u> “ <i>tsholnt</i> ” (Sabbath stew)
zh	Like the “g’s” in the French name “Georges” or the “si” in the word “Asia” <u>Examples:</u> “ <i>zhabe</i> ” (frog); “ <i>zhest</i> ”(gesture”)

### **B. Special Issues:**

1. Certain words contain the transliteration letter “d” before the transliteration letter “z”, where the “d” is more or less silent but is required nevertheless.  
Examples: “*undz*” (us), “*feldz*” (cliff).
2. Certain words contain the transliteration letter “t” before the transliteration letters “st”, where the first “t” is more or less silent but is required nevertheless.  
Examples: “*fintster*” (dark); “*fentster*” (window).
3. Verbs whose root ends in “d” retain the “d” before the conjugational ending “t”; the “d” is silent in that case.  
Examples: “*er redt*” (he speaks)—pronounced “er ret”—or “*er shmidt*” (he forges)—pronounced “er shmit”

4. Verbs whose root ends in “z” retain the “z” before the conjugational ending “st”; the “s” is silent in that case.  
Example: “*du muzst*” (you must)—pronounced as “du muzt”
  
5. Capital letters are generally not used in transliteration. They are sometimes used (but are not required) in three situations:
  - (a) At the beginning of a sentence;  
Example: “*Ikh vil aheymgeyn*” (I want to go home.)
  
  - (b) In a proper name;  
Example: “*zayn nomen iz Yankl Shapiro*”
  
  - (c) In some proper nouns that have attained general usage;  
Example: “*Peysakh*”
  
6. Letters are not doubled in transliteration.  
Examples: “*kabala*”, not “*kabbala*”: “*yom kiper*”, not “*yom kipper*”
  
7. Certain proper nouns have achieved wide usage with transliteration spellings that are not correct by the rules of standard transliteration, but are more or less acceptable.  
Examples: “*Chanukah*” or “*Hanukkah*” (preferably “*khanike*”), “*Succoth*” or “*Succos*” (preferably “*sukes*”), “*Sholem Aleichem*” (preferably “*Sholem Aleykhem*)
  
8. Words of Hebrew origin are normally transliterated with an Ashkenazic pronunciation.  
Example: “*mishpokhe*” (family), not “*mishpakha*”.  
 You may deliberately transliterate with a Sephardic pronunciation if you wish, especially in established expressions.  
Example: “*kol hakavod*” (all honor), instead of “*kol hakoved*”.
  
9. You may deliberately transliterate to represent a Yiddish dialectal pronunciation.  
Example: “*Vi gayt ir?*” (Where are you going?)
  
10. An apostrophe may be used for a contraction, but not for a possessive.  
Examples: “*s’iz*” for “*es iz*” or “*kh’hob*” for “*ikh hob*”, but not “*der mame’s shikh*” for “*der mames shikh*”.
  
11. In representing a non-vocalized vowel (a “shvo”), there are two possibilities: use an “e” or an “i”.  
Examples: “*kedey*” or “*kidey*” (in order to).



12. In words of Hebrew origin with a prefix of “b” or “l” followed by a non-vocalized vowel, one may follow the prefix with either an “e” or an apostrophe.  
Examples: “*lekhayim*” or “*l’khayim*” (the toast: To life!); “*beemes*” or “*b’emes*” (truly).
13. In words with a consonant before a final “n,” do not insert an “e” between the two consonants (Examples: “*traybn*”, not “*trayben*”; “*trefn*”, not “*trefen*”) except when there is an “m”, “n”, “ng” or “nk” before the final “n”, in which case do insert the “e” before the final “n”. (Examples: “*nemen*”, “*shaynen*”, “*zingen*” and “*trinken*”).

C. Examples of Current Published Transliteration:

1. Poetry from *Jewish Currents*

Fun Mayne Shlanke Glider (by Rashel Veprinsky)

Fun mayne shlanke glider  
 veynen kinder nit-geboyrene  
 vos vilt durkh mayn layb  
 di vayse velt derzen  
 un oyfblien unter der zun  
 mit kepelekh gekrayzlte,  
 eygelekh breyt farvunderte,  
 shvartsinke un bloy.

Nor tif in zikh fartoyb ikh  
 yene klore shtimelekh  
 mit toyznt shtimen fun a fiberishn drang  
 tsu zayn, vi itster,  
 eybik azoy boygzam, azoy shlank,  
 un fray far mayn kapriz,  
 far nekht geshternte,  
 un far dayne tsertlendike hent.

Zoln mayne teg khotsh vern hastiker farshvendt,  
 az dortn vu ir vart  
 kumen zol ikh yung tsu aykh,  
 ir veynendike eygelekh unter di vayse toyern.  
 Ikh vel aykh shtil tsuzamennemen  
 unter mayne mame-fliglen  
 un oyf epes troyern,  
 un veynen shtil mit aykh.

## 2. Prose from *Der Bay*

### Shayles un Tshuves (by Khaznte Khane Slek)

Tayere khaznte:

Mayn bruder un shvester zenen gants andersh fun mir. Zey hobn tomid geton vos undzere tate-mame hobn gevolt [az] zey zoln ton. Zey hobn zikh oysgetseykhnt in mitlshul, [zenen] gegangen in gute universitetn, [hobn] gearbet, gefunen a man un a froy, [un] khasene gehat, un mayn bruder hot tsvey kinder. Zey lebn nisht vayt fun tate-mame un zenen getraye kinder. Zey zenen oykh gut tsu mir.

Ikh bin ale mol geven dos nisht-gerotene kind in der mishpokhe. Ikh bin an oremer student, [bin] gegangen in nisht keyn vazhnem universitet, [un] a bisl tsores gehat mit der politsey (nisht keyn ernste.) A klal—mayn shteyger lebn iz avek af an ander veg.

Mayne tate-mame zenen gevorn oyfgeregt vos ikh vil zikh aribertsien keyn kalifornye, oyf der anderer zayt land. Ale kroyvim undzere voynen eyner lebn dem andern: mumes, feters, shvester-kinder—ale. Mayne tate-mame meynen az ikh vil dos [ton kedey] zey vey [tsu] ton, ober der emes iz, az ikh hob lib mayn mishpokhe. Ikh farshtey ober az mir volt geven beser ven ikh for avek fun zey. Ikh volt demolt gevorn mer umophengik un [volt] oyfgehert zikh tsu farglaykhn mit mayn shvester un bruder. Vi ken ikh dos ton un nisht vey ton mayn mishpokhe?

Darf umophengikeyt

Tayerer umophengikeyt:

Es zet mir oys, az ir hot zeyer a logishe, durkhgetrakhte sibe far vos ir vilt zikh aribertsien. Redt zikh iber mit tate-mame un zagt zey punkt vos ir hot mir geshribn: az ir tut dos nisht [kedey] zey vey tsu ton, nor kedey ir zolt kenen vern mer umophengik. Ir vilt [zikh] mer nit filn vi ir shteyt in di shotns fun ayer shvester un bruder. Zagt zey, az ir vilt [az] zey zoln [aykh] kumen tsu gast, un makht a plan [az] ir zolt aheymkumen yontef—zey zoln zikh rikhtn oyf aykh. Zagt zey, az ir vilt mit zey oft redn, un klingt zey take on, [kedey] zey zoln hobn tsutroy tsu aykh. S'vet efsher nemen a bisl tsayt, ober ven zey veln zen, az ir hot hatslokhe a dank ayer nayer umophengikeyt, veln zey zayn shtolts mit aykh.

3. Song from the Arbeter Ring *Hagode*

Zog Maran (by Avrom Reyzn and Shmuel Bugatsh)

Zog maran, du bruder mayner—  
vu iz greyt der seyder dayner?  
--In tifer heyl, in a kheyder,  
dort hob ikh gegreyt mayn seyder.

Zog maran mir—vu bay vemen  
vestu vayse matses nemen?  
--In der heyl, af gots barotn,  
hot mayn vayb dem teyg geknotn.

Zog maran—vi vest zikh klign  
a hagode vu tsu krign?  
--In der heyl, in tife shpaltn,  
hob ikh zi shoyn lang bahaltn.

Zog maran—vi vest zikh vern  
ven men vet dayn kol derhern?  
--Ven der soyne vet mikh fangen,  
vel ikh shtarbn mit gezangen.

