I became interested in Jewish languages as a college student. Initially I had only heard of Yiddish, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Judeo-Arabic, but eventually I learned about endangered languages/dialects like Judeo-Greek, Judeo-Malayalam (from Southern India), and Judeo-Tadjik (Bukharan, from Uzbekistan), as well as emerging languages/dialects like Jewish English, Jewish French, and Jewish Hungarian. For the past two decades, I have been researching and teaching about the phenomenon of Jewish languages, and I find great satisfaction in sharing what I’ve learned with scholars and students.

But classroom teaching, academic publications, and conference presentations have limited reach. Only a few dozen students each year encounter my ideas in the classroom, and given that linguistics and Jewish studies are both small fields, maybe a few hundred people hear my presentations or read my articles.
Therefore, I decided to share what I have learned about Jewish languages with the general public. Over a decade ago, I created a website about Jewish languages with an interactive map, descriptions of over a dozen languages, lists of researchers who study and translate these languages, and text and sound samples. This site brings in traffic from around the world; in 2013 alone it attracted over 50,000 unique visitors. A few years ago, I expanded the web presence of Jewish languages by creating an online interactive dictionary of the Yiddish, Hebrew, and other distinctive words used by Jews within English. It currently has almost 900 entries, and more are added each month. With a colleague who studies Mexican Jews, I created a Jewish Latin American Spanish version of this lexicon, and a Jewish Swedish site in the works.

In addition to these websites, I started to give talks in synagogues and share my thoughts about Jewish linguistic issues of the day in non-academic Jewish periodicals, such as the Forward, Sh'ma, and the Jewish Journal. Luckily, my employer, Hebrew Union College (HUC), not only respects but even encourages this kind of interaction with the public. While tenure is still based mostly on academic publications and teaching, public engagement activities like synagogue lectures, web content, and general-press articles are praised at HUC in ways they are not at many universities.

I thought that my articles, lectures, and websites were all I could do to bring Jewish languages to a general audience. And then I participated in the Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies (PEJS) working group at Brandeis’s Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education. I was inspired by Noam Pianko’s concerts, lectures, and digital media projects at the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies, as well as Lila Corwin Berman’s collaborations with Philadelphia organizations to explore Jews and food at Temple University’s Feinstein Center for American Jewish History. I began to consider what I could do to share research on Jewish languages with a broader audience. That’s when I came up with a proposal to create a Center for Jewish Languages.

To be based at HUC, the Center will promote research and awareness about the many languages spoken and written by Jews throughout history and around the world. The Center will accomplish this mission by expanding and publicizing the existing websites, creating new web content, holding conferences and public programs in conjunction with artists and musicians, developing curriculum for Jewish educational institutions (day schools, religious schools, camps, etc.), and offering support for graduate students and scholars who research Jewish languages.

Some academics might ask why I – and other PEJS scholars – voluntarily add to our already full schedules of research, teaching, and service. First, because I believe that many people outside of the academy will find the phenomenon of Jewish languages as fascinating as I do. I recently told a synagogue group about the origin of the Yiddish word bentsh (‘bless’): early Yiddish speakers felt uncomfortable with the German word for ‘bless,’ *segenen*, which also meant to ‘make the sign (of the cross).’ In its place, they used a word from Judeo-Italian, *benedice* (from Latin *benedict*), which was brought to Germanic lands by Italian Jews. As I expected, the audience responded with comments like “Wow” and “That’s so interesting.”
Jewish languages not only have intellectual appeal, but they also have the potential to strengthen contemporary Jews’ connection to Jewish communities throughout history and around the world. When I teach American Jews about Jewish languages, they realize that their “Jewish English” continues a long tradition of weaving Hebrew words into the local vernacular. For example, Judeo-Malayalam has *miniyān kuti ‘joined the quorum, became a Bar Mitzvah,’* and Judeo-Arabic has *ilmasa btā ‘afiqumēn ‘the matzah of the afikoman.’* When I show students texts of Genesis translated into Judeo-Persian and Ladino, or the Passover haggadah in Jewish Neo-Aramaic and Judeo-Italian, they see similarities between their own translation traditions and those of historical communities. The Center will encourage such connections and bring together Jews of diverse backgrounds around their common interest in Jewish languages.

The Center for Jewish Languages is still only in the idea phase. Already, though, I am in conversation with researchers who share my passion for Jewish languages and with supporters who see the value of this kind of engaged scholarly activity for the benefit of the Jewish community and the world. If that includes you, dear reader, please be in touch. I am looking forward to building new partnerships to explore and celebrate the world of Jewish languages.