Introduction: The Gift of Words

I know that I am not the only adult who remembers that special teacher who made a difference in her childhood. I was in third grade, and I was a real bookworm. When I would come across an unfamiliar word, my mom would tell me to "look it up," so I spent a fair amount of time perusing the dictionary. Sometimes, my classmates would tease me for "using big words." But my teacher, Mrs. Ivirio, recognized my vocabulary as a gift rather than a liability, and she encouraged me to develop into the voracious reader that I am today. She also taught me how to use my words to nurture relationships with others and to share my enthusiasm for words with those around me. More than thirty years later, her influence changed the course of my adulthood.

It was the summer of 2006 and I was working at The Weber School, a Jewish community high school which was moving from trailers into a new building. After protracted negotiations, the city inspectors gave us approval to occupy the building exactly one day before the opening of school. In the early morning on the Friday before Labor Day weekend, the entire faculty and staff arrived to get the classrooms ready. Although the school employed many non-Jewish staff, we knew that the building would be closed at sundown for the Jewish Sabbath and we would not be permitted to finish our work until Monday. Mildly panicked, we found ourselves racing against the clock. As we were unpacking boxes, dragging half-empty cartons from one room to another, and wondering how we would accomplish this formidable

task, I casually mentioned to another teacher that I had never *shlepped* so many boxes in one day. "Is that Yiddish?" she asked. Her question left me momentarily speechless.

As a native New Yorker, I had assumed that the whole world knew Yiddish. Living in Atlanta, I continue to read *The New York Times* religiously, working the crossword puzzle and never missing an "On Language" column. From a young age, I was interested in William Safire's explanations of Yiddish words that have become commonplace in English over the years. When I taught in a Jewish day school in New York, I discovered that even the non-Jewish teachers possessed a basic Jewish vocabulary. It had therefore never occurred to me that my colleagues in Georgia found themselves at a linguistic disadvantage in our daily conversations.

My friend's question led to my realization that much of what we say to each other gets "lost in translation." Occasionally, this occurs because an unusual word slips into the daily speech of those who know many languages. Yiddish, in particular, is a rich language with a host of words that are at once versatile and virtually untranslatable. Some of these words have crept into English dictionaries, but most are not typically found in daily conversations that take place outside of Jewish circles. Yet many Hebrew, Yiddish, and even English words represent universal concepts. Imagine if we could incorporate them into a common language, providing us access to more colorful descriptions of the mundane actions in our lives, like *shlepping* cartons when we move to a new place. As I settled the box onto a shelf in the Biology lab, I

knew that one of my roles as the school's rabbi would be to teach the faculty new words, to create a common language among our diverse group that would enable us to communicate and work together. We needed an "inside lingo" that would unite us in our efforts to inspire our students to learn.

That afternoon, I emailed the answer to my friend's question in a brief essay, and launched my "Word-to-the-Weber-Wise" project. I began walking the halls of the new building, listening for words to share each week with my colleagues. Many essays, inspired by the daily routines of our life at school, sparked conversations in the faculty lounge and led to ongoing discussions of our mission as teachers. As adults working in an educational environment, we were committed to our own life-long learning. The non-Jewish teachers wanted to connect to their Jewish students and colleagues, and were eager to share their newly-acquired vocabulary. The American-born Jewish teachers were eager to connect to the language of their immigrant grandparents and to the native language of their Israeli-born colleagues. Several teachers asked me to include English words, as well, that expressed our shared values. I was privileged to contribute to our professional growth and development, as time and again I was reminded of Mrs. Ivirio, who had been my mentor in sharing my love of words with others. This book is a culmination of two years of nurturing relationships with my colleagues, one kind word at a time.

Naturally, the most meaningful aspect of this project was personal, not professional. In creating the weekly essays, I was able to grow as a wordie, collecting

new words even as I revisited the familiar ones of my childhood. Unable to locate Mrs. Ivirio, who was no longer teaching at P.S. 52 in Staten Island, I was fortunate to reconnect with another of my favorite childhood influences, my dad. He grew up in Brooklyn speaking Yiddish to his immigrant parents. Together, we returned to the language of his youth, throwing around Yiddish phrases and debating nuances of particular words. We laughed a lot, as we made editorial decisions about what to omit, noting that some of the most colorful Yiddish words and expressions would not be suitable for the project. If I called my dad on Thursday afternoon, he knew we would be talking about words, and he helped me make almost every Friday deadline. This project brought us closer as adults, enabling me to *hock* him *a tchainik,*[1] as I now wish I had when I was younger. *Found in Translation* is a gift of words from an adult child to her parents. I am grateful to be able to share it with you.

[1] *Hock a tchainik* is a Yiddish phrase meaning talk a lot, yammer, or yak. Literally it means to knock a teapot or kettle, which I guess approximates the sound of a chatterbox.