

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Opinion Op-Ed

Opinion | Is the World Ready for Chaim Potter?

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Which one of these things is not like the other? *The Magician of Lublin*. *The Dybbuk*. *Tevye the Dairyman*. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

All are best-selling Yiddish books, but only “Harry Potter” started out his life speaking English. Translated into Yiddish — *Harry Potter un der Filosofisher Shteyn* — the book sold out in less than 48 hours in early February.

We were a little surprised. While Isaac Bashevis Singer, S. Ansky and Sholem Aleichem all grew up in the shtetls of Eastern Europe, J. K. Rowling grew up in a shire in England.



Harry Potter in the shtetl? How was the wizarding world going to translate? When we think of Yiddish stories, we think of golems and fiddlers, not wizards and magic wands. How did renowned the American Yiddishist Arun Viswanath plow through and translate 300-plus pages of magic spells, evil wizards and fantastical scenes? It must have been a daunting task.

But the more we thought about it, the more similarities we found between the worlds of Sholem Aleichem and J.K. Rowling. Maybe it isn't a crazy idea. Maybe Chaim Potter does exist ...

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry could look a lot like a yeshiva — except that it's coed, and that would never fly in the Orthodox world. But living at your school? Check. Eating with fellow students in a huge dining hall? Check. Dimly lit hallways and mysterious stairways that lead to abandoned rooms? Check. And the teachers? Some are nurturing; others are tough old men. Check.

Although many British wizarding children are invited to attend Hogwarts, some choose to be home-schooled. Others are sent abroad to learn their skills — kind of like going to a yeshiva in Israel, no?

Many young men choose their yeshiva based on its reputation. Which famous scholars attended? Did their father or grandfather go there? Likewise, Harry's best friend Ron Weasley is a Hogwarts' legacy; his parents and his six siblings all attended Hogwarts.

Students at Hogwarts look up to Albus Dumbledore, their beloved headmaster; he is a great wizard, a wise man. That's how many yeshiva buchers feel about their rebbes. In fact, Albus Dumbledore looks like a beloved rebbe with his robes, his flowing beard and his Bucharin kippah.

Hogwarts is divided into four houses, each embodying the philosophy and reputation of its founder. How does a boy find his peeps? The magical Sorting Hat is placed on his head, and it wisely matches him to the house that suits his character. In the new Yiddish translation, when it's your turn to put on the Sorting Kippah, which will be your match?

Will you be a Menschlikeit? Like the Hufflepuffs, they're known for their dedication, fair play and hard work.

You don't want to be a Mamzer. Like the Slytherins, they are the cunning, snakelike kids who will do anything to win. But Draco Malfoy will tell you they're not that bad.

If you're a brainiac, you'll be in Tzaddik House. Like Ravenclaws, they're known for their intelligence and learning.

Are you hoping for Chutzpahdik house? Like Gryffindor, Chutzpahdik is for heroes like Harry, Ron and Hermione, who showed their courage and chivalry when faced with demons and death.

When Harry needs to summon up the spirits to save him from disaster, he whips out his wand and says, "Expecto Patronum." In the Yiddish version, will he just give a good "kinehora" followed by a "poo-poo-poo" to keep away the evil spirits and Dementors?

When it's time for dessert, Harry Potter asks for his favorite: a treacle tart. It's a classic gooey, sweet British dessert. In the Yiddish edition, the boys could ask for a chocolate rugelach or a nice slice of apple cake.

Harry Potter and his classmates show their mettle in the rough-and-tumble game of Quidditch. Players ride a broom and chase the golden snitch. The athletes fly fast and slug it out in the air. There aren't many Yiddish words for flying team sports. Yeshiva students are known for their mental gymnastics rather than their physical skills. Have you ever heard of the championship Crown Heights football team? Neither have we.

So, what's next? A deli in Daigon Alley?