

Discussion Questions for *Outwitting History* by Aaron Lansky

From the Massachusetts Center for the Book

1. On their first trip to New York to look for Yiddish books, Lansky and his fellow students stop for lunch at the Garden Cafeteria. The humorous scene that follows highlights the central theme of *difference* and *similarity* developed throughout the book. How does difference yield to common cause at the physical and emotional level in his vignette? Where do you find these themes further developed in the book?
2. Characters in this story are dressed in particular and significant ways. How do the clothes help us to understand people, priorities, and cultures in *Outwitting History*?
3. Lansky describes himself as the man who saved Yiddish books (rather than Yiddish literature). What do books mean to Lansky and to the people who donate them? Do books bear meaning in your family or cultural history? Why did books take on such special importance for Jewish immigrants in America?
4. Why did so many older Jews consider their Yiddish books their *yerushah* or “inheritance”? How is this concept of inheritance different from or similar to your own?
5. Much is made of the difference between the Hebrew and Aramaic books that scholars read and the Yiddish books that Lansky too often finds heaped in dusty piles of attics and basements. The differences are those of classical and popular culture, of high and low art. How do those distinctions play out in the book? How do other distinctions between high and low culture affect your life?
6. Discuss some of the ways the next generation considered themselves to be “unlike” their immigrant grandparents. Is it unusual to find children more interested in the generation of their grandparents than that of their parents?
7. Lansky describes the National Yiddish Book Center as a “home” for Yiddish books. Where had these books been living before? Why did they need a home?
8. When Lansky wanted to start the National Yiddish Book Center, he came full circle, to Amherst, Massachusetts, where he first learned to read Yiddish. What motivated this choice?
9. What oppositions to a National Yiddish Book Center did Lansky encounter and have to overcome? What were the political and fiscal realities with which he grappled? Do you think most start-up nonprofits face similar challenges?
10. Lansky describes the Canadian immigration experience as a “mosaic” rather than a melting pot. What does he mean by this? How did American and Canadian Jewish culture develop differently?
11. This is a story, finally, of local heroes, of individuals who make contributions to a larger good. Who is your favorite local hero or what is your favorite vignette from the book? How does this personal story fit into the larger historical context?
12. In the end, do you think Yiddish “outwits” history? Why or why not?