

Unit One

שלום עליכם! וואָס מאַכסטו?

Hello! How are you?

In this unit you will learn:

- how to introduce yourself and others
- how to ask how someone is
- how to ask and answer yes/no questions
- how to ask and answer open-ended questions
- how to use the indefinite article (a/an)
- pronouns
- the present tense of the verbs זײַן (to be) and האָבן (to have)





Dialogue 1



(CD1; 7)

Khane (the Yiddish equivalent of Hannah) is a new student on an intensive week-long Yiddish course. After one of the lessons she wants to try out some of the greetings that she has learned. She introduces herself to Rokhl (Rachel), a more advanced student.

חנה שלום עליכם!
 רחל עליכם שלום!
 חנה איך הייס חנה. ווי הייסטו?
 רחל איך הייס רחל. וואָס מאַכסטו?
 חנה זייער גוט, אַ דאַנק. וואָס מאַכסטו?
 רחל פֿרעג נישט! איך בין זייער מיט און איך האָב אַ סך אַרבעט!

KHANE sholem aleykhem!
 ROKHL aleykhem sholem!
 KHANE ikh heys khane. vi heystu?
 ROKHL ikh heys rokhl. vos makhstu?
 KHANE zeyer gut, a dank. vos makhstu?
 ROKHL freg nisht! ikh bin zeyer mid un ikh hob a sakh arbet!

KHANE *Hello!*
 ROKHL *Hello!*
 KHANE *My name is (literally: I am called) Khane. What's your name (literally: how are you called)?*
 ROKHL *My name is Rokhl. How are you?*
 KHANE *Good, thanks. How are you?*
 ROKHL *Don't ask! I'm very tired and I have a lot of work!*



Vocabulary

Hannah	khane	חנה [כאַנע]
hello	sholem aleykhem	שלום עליכם [שאַלעם אַלייכעם]
Rachel	rokhl	רחל [ראַכל]
hello (in reply)	aleykhem sholem	עליכם שלום [אַלייכעם שאַלעם]
I	ikh	איך

am called	<i>heys</i>	הייס
What's your name (literally: how are you called)?	<i>vi heystu?</i>	ווי הייסטו?
how	<i>vi</i>	ווי
How are you?	<i>vos makhstu?</i>	וואָס מאַכסטו?
what	<i>vos</i>	וואָס
very	<i>zeyer</i>	זייער
good	<i>gut</i>	גוט
thanks	<i>a dank</i>	אַ דאַנק
Don't ask!	<i>freg nisht!</i>	פֿרעג נישט!
am	<i>bin</i>	בין
tired	<i>mid</i>	מיד
and	<i>un</i>	און
have	<i>hob</i>	האַב
a lot, much	<i>a sakh</i>	אַ סך [סאַך]
work	<i>arbet</i>	אַרבעט

Language points



1 Greetings

There are two main ways of saying hello in Yiddish. The first, שלום, עליכם, comes from the *loshn-koydesh* (Hebrew-Aramaic) component, in which it literally means 'peace upon you'. The response to this is שלום עליכם, literally 'upon you peace'.

You can also say גוט מאָרגן, which literally means 'good morning' but can be used in the afternoon too. If someone greets you this way, you can respond either by repeating גוט מאָרגן or with גוט יאָר *gut yor* (literally: good year). You can also say גוט מאָרגן, גוט יאָר, a combination of the two.

These greetings are equally common and can be used relatively interchangeably.

'Goodbye' is זי געזונט *zay gezuñt* (literally: be healthy) when speaking to one person or זייט געזונט *zayt gezuñt* when speaking to more than one person.

2 Asking and answering how someone is

'How are you' in Yiddish is וואָס מאַכסטו. This is composed of וואָס, literally 'what', and מאַכסטו, which is a verb that literally means 'are you doing', but the whole expression is idiomatic and means only 'how are you'.

The following are possible answers to וואָס מאַכסטו?

(very) well	<i>(zeyer) gut</i>	גוט (זייער)
all right; OK	<i>in őrdenung</i>	אין אָרדענונג
so-so (literally: neither here nor there)	<i>nisht ahīn</i>	נישט אַהיין נישט אַהער
	<i>nisht ahēr</i>	
not (so) good	<i>nisht (azoōy) gut</i>	נישט (אַזוי) גוט
at least I've got my health (literally: as long as healthy)	<i>abī gezuīt</i>	אַבִּי געזױנט
I'm getting by (literally: one drags oneself)	<i>me shlept zikh</i>	מע שלעפט זיך
Don't ask!	<i>freg nisht!</i>	פֿרעג נישט!

Some of these responses have precise equivalents in English, e.g. גוט (good) and אין אָרדענונג (all right); however, many of them may sound a bit negative from an English-speaking perspective. In Yiddish-speaking culture, however, expressions like פֿרעג נישט and מע שלעפט זיך are considered quite acceptable and are commonly heard in response to וואָס מאַכסטו.



Exercise 1

Fill in the gaps in the following conversation.

- 1 _____!
- 2 עליכם שלום!
- 3 _____?
- 4 איך הייס חנה.
- 5 _____?
- 6 פֿרעג נישט!

Dialogue 2



(CD1; 9)



Khane wants to find out some more about Rokhl. She wonders whether Rokhl is a teacher or a student, what she thinks of the course, and who else she knows there.

חנה ביסטו אַ לערערקע דאָ?
 רחל ניין, איך בין אַ סטודענטקע. און דו?
 חנה איך בין אויך אַ סטודענטקע. איך בין אַן אָנהייבער. זענען דײַנע לעקציעס
 שווער?
 רחל יאָ, זייער שווער!
 חנה ווער איז דאָס?
 רחל דאָס איז דוד. ער איז אויך אַ סטודענט דאָ.
 חנה זײַט איר אין דעם זעלבן קלאַס?
 רחל יאָ, מיר זענען אין דעם זעלבן קלאַס, אָבער ער איז קלוג און איך בין פֿויל!

KHANE bistu a lererke do?

ROKHL neyn, ikh bin a studentke. un du?

KHANE ikh bin oykh a studentke. ikh bin an onheyber. zenen dayne lektsyes shver?

ROKHL yo, zeyer shver!

KHANE ver iz dos?

ROKHL dos iz dovid. er iz oykh a student do.

KHANE zayt ir in dem zelbn klas?

ROKHL yo, mir zenen in dem zelbn klas, ober er iz klug un ikh bin foyl!

KHANE *Are you a teacher here?*

ROKHL *No, I'm a student. And you?*

KHANE *I'm also a student. I'm a beginner. Are your lessons hard?*

ROKHL *Yes, very hard!*

KHANE *Who's that?*

ROKHL *That's Dovid. He's also a student here.*

KHANE *Are you in the same class?*

ROKHL *Yes, we're in the same class, but he's clever and I'm lazy!*

**A
CB**
Vocabulary

are you (see language point 6)	<i>bistu</i>	ביסטו
a (see language point 5)	<i>a</i>	אַ
(female) teacher	<i>lērerke</i>	לֵעֶרַקע
here	<i>do</i>	דאָ
no	<i>neyn</i>	ניין
(female) student	<i>studentke</i>	סטודענטקע
you (singular)	<i>du</i>	דו
also	<i>oykh</i>	אויך
an (see language point 5)	<i>an</i>	אַן
beginner	<i>ōnheyber</i>	אָנהייבער
(we/they) are	<i>zenen</i>	זענען
your	<i>dayne</i>	דיינע
lessons	<i>lektsyes</i>	לעקציעס
difficult (can also mean 'heavy' or 'hard' in other contexts)	<i>shver</i>	שווער
yes	<i>yo</i>	יאָ
who	<i>ver</i>	ווער
is	<i>iz</i>	איז
that	<i>dos</i>	דאָס
David	<i>dovid</i>	דוד (דאָויד)
he	<i>er</i>	ער
student (male)	<i>studēnt</i>	סטודענט
(you plural) are	<i>zayt</i>	זייט
you (plural)	<i>ir</i>	איר
in	<i>in</i>	אין
the	<i>dem</i>	דעם
same	<i>zelbn</i>	זעלבן
class	<i>klas</i>	קלאַס
we	<i>mir</i>	מיר
but	<i>ober</i>	אָבער
clever	<i>klug</i>	קלוג
lazy	<i>foyl</i>	פֿויל

Language points



3 Pronouns

Pronouns are words that can be used in place of nouns to refer to people, animals, places, or things. Pronouns can be either singular or plural. Here is a chart of the Yiddish pronouns and their English equivalents.

Plural	Singular
מיר we	איך I
איר you	דו you (informal)
זיי they	איר you (polite)
	ער he
	זי she
	עס it

There are two forms for 'you' (singular), דו and איר. דו is used in informal situations, e.g. when speaking to family, friends, colleagues, or children. איר is used in more formal situations, e.g. when speaking politely to figures of authority or older people. However, use of these two forms is not uniform within the Yiddish-speaking world: thus, in English-speaking countries and Israel the polite form איר is not used very often and it is fine to use the informal דו in most situations, except if you want to be particularly polite. If you meet someone new and want to show respect, it is always fine to err on the side of caution and use איר; generally the person you are addressing will tell you that it is fine to use דו with him or her.

Note that איר is also the word for 'you' (plural), without any nuances of politeness. Context will allow you to distinguish between the polite singular and plural uses of this form.

4 The present tense of the verb זײַן (to be)

Yiddish verbs all have a basic form, called the infinitive, which ends in ךֿ-. This is the form that you use when you look up a verb in the glossary or dictionary. The infinitive of the verb 'to be' in Yiddish is זײַן.

In addition, Yiddish verbs have different tenses (times at which the action happens, i.e. present, past, future). The present tense refers to an action happening at the time of speaking. In Dialogue 2 Khane and Rokhl used several different forms of זײַן in the present tense. Verbs change their form in the present tense depending on who is doing the action, i.e. they match the pronoun being used. Changing the form of a verb to match its pronoun is called 'conjugating' the verb. Here is the complete conjugation (list of changes) for זײַן in the present tense. We'll learn this verb first because it is very common, but keep in mind that it is irregular (as is the verb 'to be' in English). In Unit 2 we'll look at the present tense of regular verbs, which are simpler to conjugate.

Note that the pronouns and verb forms can be referred to by labels: the 'I' form is called 'first person singular', the 'you' singular form is called 'second person singular', etc.

Plural		Singular	
מיר זענען/זענט	1 st person plural	איך בין	1 st person singular
We are		I am	
איר זענט/זענט	2 nd person plural	דו ביסט	2 nd person singular
You are		You are	
זיי זענען/זענט	3 rd person plural	ער/זי/עס איז	3 rd person singular
They are		He/she/it is	

Note that the first, second, and third person plural all have two variant verb forms. Each one is equally acceptable and you can use whichever one you like.

Note also that the first and third person plural verb forms are the same. This is true of all Yiddish verbs.

5 The indefinite article אַ/אַן (a/an)

In Dialogue 2 Rokhl said אַ סטודענטקע אין בין, 'I am a student'. The word אַ is called the indefinite article and is used before nouns (words

for people, places, or things) that are not specific. It resembles the English indefinite article 'a/an' in both sound and meaning. Just like in English, the Yiddish indefinite article has two forms. אַ is used before words beginning with a consonant, while אַן (an) is used before words beginning with a vowel. This variation is purely phonetic; both forms mean exactly the same thing. Compare these two sentences for illustration:

איך בין אַ סטודענטקע. דאָס איז אַן אַפּל.
This is an apple. I am a student.

6 Asking and answering yes/no questions

In a Yiddish sentence the subject (the noun or pronoun referring to the person that is doing the action) comes before the verb. For example, Rokhl said, מיר זענען אין דעם זעלבן קלאַס 'We're in the same class'.

However, when asking a question that can be answered with יאָ or ניין (yes or no), this order is reversed, so that the verb comes before the subject. Thus, Khane asked Rokhl, זײַנט איר אין דעם זעלבן קלאַס? 'Are you in the same class?'

Notice that when Khane asked if Rokhl was a teacher, she said, ביסטו אַ לערערקע? rather than ביסט דו אַ לערערקע?, which you might have expected. This is because in yes/no questions with דו as the subject, the pronoun merges with the verb and the ך disappears when you reverse the subject and verb. The sequence below illustrates this process. This rule applies to all verbs, not just זײַן, so keep it in mind because later you'll need to use it when asking yes/no questions with other verbs.

דו ביסט ← ביסט דו ← ביסטו ← ביסטו
(incorrect) (incorrect) (incorrect)

Exercise 2

Fill in the gaps with the correct form of זײַן in the present tense.

- 1 איך _____ אַ לערערקע.
- 2 ער _____ אַ סטודענט.
- 3 מיר _____ מיד.
- 4 זיי _____ אין דעם זעלבן קלאַס.



- 5 דו _____ אַ סטודענטקע.
 6 איר _____ אין דעם קלאַס.
 7 די לעקציעס _____ שווער.



Exercise 3

Answer the following questions based on Dialogue 2.

- 1 איז רחל אַ סטודענטקע?
 2 איז חנה אַ לערערקע?
 3 ווער איז דוד?
 4 איז דוד קלוג?
 5 איז רחל פֿויל?
 6 זענען חנה און דוד אין דעם זעלבן קלאַס?



Exercise 4

Insert the correct form of the indefinite article (אַ or אַן) into the following sentences.

- 1 רחל איז _____ סטודענטקע.
 2 איך האָב _____ עפל.
 3 דוד איז _____ סטודענט.
 4 חנה איז _____ אָנהייבער.
 5 איך האָב _____ לעקציע.



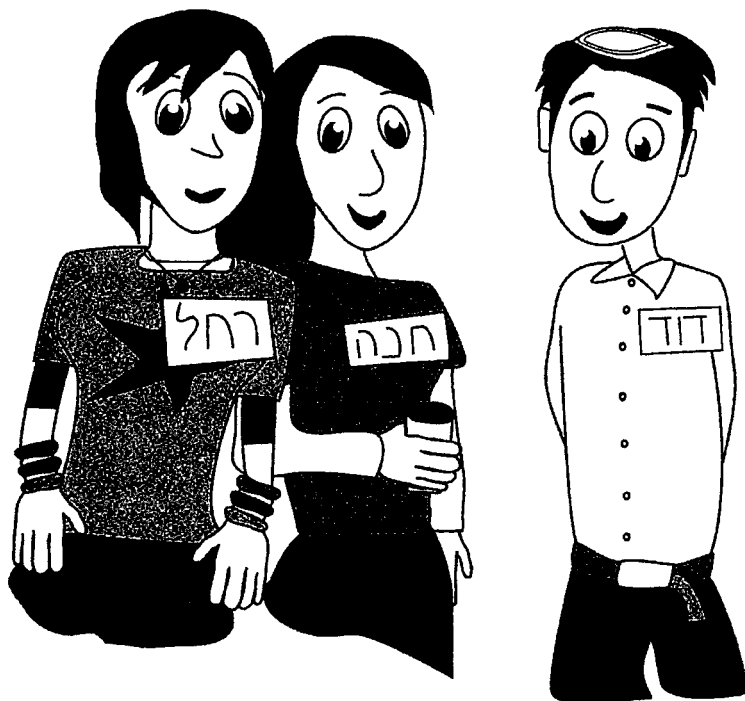
Dialogue 3



(CD1; 11)

Rokhl introduces Khane to her friend Dovid. Khane asks Dovid some more questions but then gets tired from speaking so much Yiddish.

- רחל, דוד, דאָס איז חנה. זי איז אַ נייע סטודענטקע דאָ.
 חנה שלום עליכם, דוד. וואָס מאַכסטו?
 דוד אין אַרדענונג, אָבער איך האָב צו פֿיל אַרבעט.
 חנה רחל האָט אויך אַ סך אַרבעט! פֿאַרוואָס האָט איר אַזוי פֿיל?
 דוד מיר האָבן שטענדיק אַ סך היימאַרבעט. דו האָסט אַ מזל, דו ביסט אַן אָנהייבער!
 חנה אַ מזל! איך בין זייער מיד פֿון רעדן אַזוי פֿיל ייִדיש!



ROKHL dovid, dos iz khane. zi iz a naye studentke do.
 KHANE sholem aleykhem, dovid. vos makhstu?
 DOVID in ordenung, ober ikh hob tsu fil arbet.
 KHANE rokhl hot oykh a sakh arbet! far vos hot ir azoy fil?
 DOVID mir hobn shtendik a sakh heymarbet. du host a mazl,
 du bist an onheyber!
 KHANE a mazl?! ikh bin zeyer mid fun redn azoy fil yidish!

ROKHL *Dovid, this is Khane. She's a new student here.*
 KHANE *Hi, Dovid. How are you?*
 DOVID *OK, but I have too much work.*
 KHANE *Rokhl also has a lot of work! Why do you have so much?*
 DOVID *We always have a lot of homework. You're lucky (literally: you have a luck); you're a beginner!*
 KHANE *Lucky?! I'm really tired from speaking so much Yiddish!*



Vocabulary

new	<i>naye</i>	נייע
too much	<i>tsu fil</i>	צו פיל
(he/she/it) has; (you plural) have (see language point 7)	<i>hot</i>	האַט
why	<i>farvōs/far vos</i>	פֿאַרוואָס (can also be spelled as פֿאַר וואָס)
so	<i>azōy</i>	אַזױ
so much	<i>azōy fil</i>	אַזױ פיל
(we) have; (they) have (see language point 7)	<i>hobn</i>	האַבן
always	<i>shtendik</i>	שטענדיק
homework	<i>heymarbet</i>	הײַמאַרבעט
(you singular) have	<i>host</i>	האַסט
luck	<i>mazl</i>	מזל [מאַזל]
from; of	<i>fun</i>	פֿון
to speak; speaking	<i>redn</i>	רעדן
Yiddish	<i>yidish</i>	ייִדיש



Language points

7 The present tense of the verb האָבן (to have)

Here is the conjugation of the present tense of the verb האָבן (to have). This is another very common but slightly irregular verb. This time note the suffixes (endings) in bold; they correspond to each pronoun and we'll see them again when we look at regular verbs in the present tense.

Plural		Singular	
מיר האָבן We have	1 st person plural	איך האָב I have	1 st person singular
איר האָט You have	2 nd person plural	דו האָסט You have	2 nd person singular
זיי האָבן They have	3 rd person plural	ער/זי/עס האָט He/she/it has	3 rd person singular

Note the following patterns, which can be applied to almost all Yiddish verbs in the present tense:

- 1 The first and third person plural forms are identical to each other and to the infinitive.
- 2 The third person singular and second person plural forms are identical.

Note the following irregularity specific to האָבן: the ב disappears in the second and third person singular and in the second person plural.

8 Asking and answering open-ended questions

In Dialogue 2 Khane asked Rokhl, ווער איז דאָס? 'Who's that?' This is an open-ended question requiring an answer other than yes or no. To ask an open-ended question in Yiddish you first take a question word like ווער (who), וואָס (what), or פֿאַרוואָס (why), then add the verb, followed by the subject. This word order is the same as for yes/no questions with the addition of the question word at the beginning. Look at these examples of open-ended questions and possible answers:

Answer

די נײַע סטודענטקע איז חנה.
The new student is Khane.

דאָס איז אַן עפּל.
That's an apple.

דוד איז אַ סטודענט פֿון ייִדיש.
Dovid is a student of Yiddish.

Question

ווער איז די נײַע סטודענטקע?
Who is the new student?

וואָס איז דאָס?
What's that?

ווער איז דוד?
Who is Dovid?



Exercise 5

Fill in the gaps with the correct form of the verb האָבן in the present tense.

- 1 מיר _____ אַ סך היימאַרבעט.
- 2 איד _____ אָן עפל.
- 3 דו _____ צו פֿיל אַרבעט.
- 4 איר _____ אַ מזל.
- 5 די לערערקע _____ אַ נניע סטודענטקע.
- 6 זיי _____ אַ בוך (book).



Exercise 6

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate question word. Choose from among פֿאַרוואָס, ווי, וואָס, ווער.

- 1 _____ איז דוד?
- 2 _____ איז חנה מיד?
- 3 _____ הייסטו?
- 4 _____ מאַכסטו?
- 5 _____ איז אַ נניע סטודענטקע?
- 6 _____ איז רחל אַזוי פֿיל?
- 7 _____ האָט אַ מזל?



Supplementary text



(CD1; 13)

Khane has recently started keeping a journal in order to practise her Yiddish. Try reading this excerpt from it.

אויך הייס חנה. אויך בין אַ סטודענטקע פֿון ייִדיש. אויך בין אַן אָנהייבער.
די לערערקע איל א.ט. אָבער די לעקציעס לענען לייזער שווער און אויך
האַב צו פֿיל היימאַרבעט! רחל און דוד לענען אויך סטודענטן. ליי לענען
אין דעם לעבן קלאַס. ליי האָבן אויך אַ סך היימאַרבעט. מיר לענען
שטענדיק מידי!