

PLATZ NOT PLOTZ

HOWARD JACOBSON ON THE SUPERIORITY OF MANCUNIAN YIDDISH

There is a Yiddish word I want to introduce you to, because I believe your life will be the richer for knowing it. The word is *platz*. It's possible you have encountered it already in American novels, though spelled with an O rather than an A. That is how London Jews pronounce it too – *plotz*. But *plotz* is wrong. All Yiddish as pronounced by London Jews is wrong. You have to come from Manchester to know how Yiddish should be spoken. And in Manchester the word is *platz*.

It's an ethno-diaspora thing partly. Lithuanian Yiddish is more expressive than Polish or German Yiddish, and the vicissitudes of migration meant that Manchester got more than its fair share of Lithuanians. But that's not the only reason. Yiddish was language on the move; no sooner had it evolved in one place than its speakers were shunted to another. Thus it made do with whatever it could hastily pick up and pack away. And in Manchester, unsurprisingly, it picked up Mancunian – those mute inglorious flattened 'a's, those

gormless dull-thud bugger me I've just bumped into t'butcher on t'bus'u's, and the finely modulated self-deprecation which such vowels encourage.

Londoners are incapable of telling a joke because they believe it must illustrate their incorrigibility. When a Londoner narrates a story he is always his own hero, pick-pocketing the wits of everyone he encounters. If you come from Manchester you know that a tale is funny only if the butt of it is you. At a deeper level of absurdist angst, Lithuanian Yiddish understands that too. Put them together and you have a marriage made in comedic heaven.

But let's get back to *platz*. The word has two applications which on the face of it are contradictory. Either you can *platz* laughing – *platzten* in German meaning to burst or split. So when you *platz* you actually disassemble, come apart at the seams with mirth. Or you *platz* from anger and frustration. Thus a person who upsets or exasperates you gives you the *platz*. Your children give you the *platz* by bringing home unsuitable partners or

failing to win a place at Oxford. You wouldn't say Hitler gave you the *platz* – the word is not big enough to go on a Hitler errand but you can get the *platz* reading the papers or watching England play football. When employed to its full potential, it implies a continuous, not a temporary, annoyance. It can, of course, be fun to get the *platz*, particularly when others are getting it with you. Publoads of English supporters *platzing* simultaneously when Peter Crouch fouls himself in the penalty area are probably having the most pleasure available to mortals in this vale of tears. This is why *platz* – with its opposing suggestions of mirth and ire – is such a useful concept. It acknowledges the perverse joy which frustration brings.

In a crazy world, getting the *platz* probably keeps us sane.

Abridged from 'Take a leaf from the Yiddish book to keep you sane during these annoying days' *The Independent*, 24 June 2006.