

From shtetl into wilderness: exploring nature in Yiddish culture

July 1, 8pm-9pm (Warsaw time)

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Was shtetl far from nature? We will not find a single answer to this question. If we asked yeshiva students what they know about flora and fauna, they would probably tell us about the beauty of Eretz Israel, but wouldn't be able to say much about their immediate surroundings. For centuries Jews across Eastern Europe made a living by trading in the produce of the land, and even kept home gardens and raised animals. But their domestic space was usually narrowed to familiar towns and townlets. They feared wandering into fields and forests, which – on the other hand – were a real blessing and a source of wealth for Jewish *yeshuvnikes*, inhabitants of villages. Noticing the positive influences of nature required a change in perceiving this wild space not only as a potential threat, but also as an opportunity. The change of perspective that happened in the second half of the 19th century opened up new possibilities: from visits to spas, to participation in a broad tourist movement.