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## Revisit to kibosh – OED3’s tentative consideration of a Yiddish origin for kibosh in ‘put the kibosh on’ should be definitively set aside

Gerald Leonard Cohen  
*Missouri University of Science and Technology*, [gcohen@mst.edu](mailto:gcohen@mst.edu)

Matthew Little

Stephen Goranson

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Department of Arts, Languages, & Philosophy  
Missouri University of Science & Technology  
Rolla, MO 65409

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REVISIT TO *KIBOSH* – *OED3*'S TENTATIVE CONSIDERATION  
OF A YIDDISH ORIGIN FOR *KIBOSH* IN *PUT THE KIBOSH ON*  
SHOULD BE DEFINITELY SET ASIDE

Gerald Cohen, Matthew Little, Stephen Goranson

INTRODUCTION

[Note: Any mention of *kibosh* in this article pertains only to its use  
in the expression *put the kibosh on*]

This is our second article on *OED3*'s 2019 revision of its entry  
*kibosh* (noun). That *OED3* revision retains its original judgment of  
'Origin unknown' but then does two things which we regard very  
favorably:

The editors mention: 'Early evidence appears to be from colloquial  
and working-class English as spoken in London (Stephen Goranson  
deserves credit for that discovery). Then, in presenting three principal  
etymologies, *OED3* puts our suggestion first (*kibosh* from the type of  
whip known as *kurbash*) and mentions that our book discusses it in  
detail.

Next *OED3* presents the suggestion that *kibosh* derives from the Irish  
term for 'cap of death,' but the presentation strangely comes very close  
to including a de facto rebuttal of that etymology. See also  
Cohen/Goranson/Little (Feb.) 2020 for a detailed discussion of the cap-  
of-death etymology; we believe we have successfully rebutted it.

Finally, *OED3*'s third principal etymology is that *kibosh* derives from  
Yiddish:

'3. Another suggestion takes the word to be of Yiddish origin, and  
there is an early example of it in Jewish usage in London (1835);  
however, no likely Yiddish etymon is recorded (although there have  
been various proposals for the further etymology of such a word or  
phrase, e.g. Hebrew *kābaš* to subject, to subdue, to tread down;  
compare also Hebrew *kibbeš* to subdue, which is < the same base).'

PROBLEMS WITH THE ATTEMPT TO DERIVE  
*KIBOSH* FROM YIDDISH

PROBLEM #1: THERE IS NO YIDDISH WORD THAT *KIBOSH*  
COULD DERIVE FROM

*OED3* mentions the possible derivation of *kibosh* from Yiddish but adds: ‘however, no likely Yiddish etymon is recorded.’ That is absolutely correct; there is none. But if no likely Yiddish etymon is recorded, on what basis is anyone supposed to accept that *kibosh* derives from Yiddish?

PROBLEM #2: ALLEGED 1835 JEWISH USAGE IN LONDON – NO  
SIGN OF YIDDISH VOCABULARY IN THE SPEAKER’S STATE-  
MENTS, AND HIS TWO MENTIONS OF *KIBOSH* SEEM TO REFER  
TO A WHIP.

*OED3*’s *kibosh* etymology says in part:

‘Another suggestion takes the word to be of Yiddish origin, and there is an early example of it in Jewish usage in London (1835).’

But although the 1835 speaker is Jewish, there is no evidence of Yiddish vocabulary in his speech; he was the plaintiff in a British court case and wanted to be understood. And the context of his two *kibosh* statements (neither one is mentioned by *OED3*) indicates he referred to an instrument that could be used for striking. It can’t be the clogmaking ‘kibosh’ (an iron-bar tool), first attested in the 1860s in the north of England, so that leaves the whip (*kibosh* from *kurbash*), which is attested at least from 1834 in London.

The reference to the whip being raised or used to strike the speaker is made only figuratively:

1. ‘They say so [make accusations] to rise the kibosh against me, and my wife.’ [sic: rise]
2. ‘...they gets other Jews give me the kibosh upon me, and it’s all the same to me which of the whole set struck me.’

Most of the 1835 newspaper article containing these two instances of ‘kibosh’ is reprinted below, pp. 6-8.

PROBLEM #3: HEBREW *kāḇaš* WON’T WORK; HEBREW AND YIDDISH SCHOLAR DAVID GOLD: PRONUNCIATION IS *kavash*

As mentioned above (p. 2), *OED3* says: ‘...however, no likely Yiddish etymon is recorded.’ Immediately thereafter we read:

‘(although there have been various proposals for the further etymology of such a word or phrase, e.g. Hebrew *kāḇaš* to subject, to subdue, to tread down; compare also Hebrew *kibbeš* to subdue, which is < the same base).’

*OED3* speaks here of ‘various proposals,’ but we are aware of only one – the one cited by *OED3*, viz., Hebrew *kāḇaš* ‘to subject, to subdue, to tread down.’ But Hebrew/Yiddish scholar David L. Gold has already effectively rebutted this suggestion in his 2011 article (p. 114):

**4.F.** ‘...someone possessing a baby flea’s thimbleful of Hebrew and far less Yiddish must have learned of the real HEBREW verb *kavash*, among the meanings of which are **1.** “conquer, subdue”. **2.** “subjugate, enslave. **3.** suppress, restrain”, and with a defective magic word, turned it into the imaginary YIDDISH words \**“kabas”* and \**“kabasen”*’.

Gold’s credentials on matters of Hebrew and Yiddish are impressive. He grew up speaking Yiddish and taught Yiddish and Hebrew studies at the University of Haifa. He has a long record of scholarly publications and has edited the journal *Jewish Language Studies*. He is immersed in Hebrew and Yiddish studies and is passionate about rebutting incorrect statements that this or that English word derives from Yiddish or Hebrew. He is quick to point out that these errors arise from people with minimal or no knowledge of Yiddish or Hebrew and are perpetuated by others who are similarly unfamiliar with these languages.

This whole subject of incorrect derivations from Yiddish is (to use the vernacular) ‘in his wheelhouse.’

EXCERPTS FROM GOLD'S 2011 REJECTION OF A POSSIBLE  
YIDDISH ORIGIN OF *KIBOSH*

Here now are a few excerpts from Gold 2011: 112-115:

p.112: 'John Neville Gosling (1905-1977) was a founding member of the New Scotland Yard Squad, the purpose of which was to gather intelligence, chiefly in the East End of London. Eric Partridge reported *kibosh* 'sentence of eighteen months in prison' in Gosling 1959:

“*Kibosh*, v. and as n. in *put the kibosh on*, has as its main sense ‘to ruin, spoil.’ The latest *OED* Sup. 1976, offers no explanation for the word’s derivation, but the very oddity and exotic feel of it have prompted several etymologies, the most plausible being B. & L., [Barrère & Leland] ‘ex Yiddish *kabas*, *kabbasen*, to suppress’.

...”

p. 113: ““the most plausible being B. & L.”? What could the linguisticless and the Yiddishless Paul Beale, a soldier, have possibly known about Yiddish to authorize him to make a mockery of standards of evidence and hand down a judgment about the linguisticless and the Yiddishless Eric Partridge’s making a mockery of standards of evidence and handing down a judgment about the linguisticless and the Yiddishless Barrère and the linguisticless and the Yiddishless Leland’s fantasies – *kabas*, *kabbasen*, “to suppress” are the “most plausible” etymons of our problematic word? For another example of Beale’s naivete in matters linguistic in general and Jewish linguistic in particular, see Gold 1989b. Partridge and Beale could not have drafted an etymology *per artem* even if you had held a gun to their heads. As Voltaire is alleged to have remarked, “Etymology is the science where the consonants count for very little and the vowels for nothing at all.”...

p. 114: ‘In the eyes of the hordes of ignoramuses pontificating on etymology, our science consists of nothing more than finding a similar-looking word, whether real or imaginary, proclaiming it the etymon, and then rushing on to another blunder. Partridge’s and Beale’s putting their worthless stamp of approval on Barrère and Leland’s imaginary

\*“kabas” and imaginary \*“kabbasen” shows that the “rule” of etymology they knew was that “if item *x* looks or sounds like item *y*, *x* must be derived from *y*, even if *y* is fantasy”.

‘To set the record straight on these two ghosts [i.e., the fantasies \*“kabas” and \*“kabbasen”]:

...4.E. ‘Let’s stop playing serious with Barrère, Leland, Partridge, and Beale’s illusions, and self-delusions...and get to the point: no amount of reasonable romanization of those two fantasies...would yield any Yiddish verb meaning “to suppress” or any other Yiddish word which even by an excruciatingly painful stretch of the imagination could be relevant to the problem at hand or yield even any Yiddish words at all. The only Yiddish verb which even faintly resembles those two ghosts is the periphrastic verb *goyver zayn* “overcome, vanquish, surmount, conquer”, which is too far in form from our problematic word to be relevant...’

4.F. ... [Gold then presents the five lines emphasizing that Hebrew has *kavash*, not *kabash*; quote above, p. 4.]

## APPENDIX

### 1. 1835 NEWSPAPER ARTICLE WITH *KIBOSH*; A GERMAN JEW ACCUSES MEMBERS OF LONDON’S JEWISH COMMUNITY OF THREATENING HIM AND HIS WIFE WITH VIOLENCE

Here is a reprint of most of item; italics are added to highlight the two *kibosh* sentences.

*True Sun* [London] May 15, 1835. Police Intelligence: Mansion-House, p. 4/4.

‘A German Jew named *Myers*, summoned two officers of the synagogue for having urged on other Jews to assault and to otherwise molest him and his wife. *Myers* said in the phraseology of the foreign Jew, that a

great prejudice was raised against him by the defendants, who accused him of having been naturalized [G. Cohen: i.e., having converted to Judaism rather than having been born into it] in order to have a good excuse for attacking him. The consequence of this report was, that all the low-born Jews, who felt the sin of conversion to be a grievous one, never ceased to annoy and insult him; and as he “vas a walking the other day mid his vife, a set of them falls upon him, and threatened to murther his vife – poor voman, though she vas the mother of eleven shilders.”

‘The Lord Mayor – And was this because you were a naturalized Jew?  
‘Please you, my lord, I ain’t no such a thing; I am a real Jew, and I never was naturalized. *They say so to rise the kibosh against me, and my vife,* [italics added] vot I vas a valking mid, when they comes down upon us. Ve goes reglar to the synagogue, and gentlemen knows it. I’m as good a Jew as any on um all, and so is my poor vife.

‘The Lord Mayor – And can you assign no reason for the violent conduct towards you?

‘Mrs. Myers – No, please you lordship. I only vent to one for a little money, for my husband was in the hospital and they makes no more but calls me an old German bunter and kicks me out of doors.

‘The Lord Mayor – Can you swear that either of these defendants kicked you out of doors.

‘Mrs. Myers – No, I can’t swear dat; but I can swear dat dey said, “go out of de house, you old b\_\_\_h.”

‘The Lord Mayor – Can your husband swear that they struck him?  
‘Myers – I don’t think I can swear; but *they gets other Jews to give me the kibosh upon me, and it’s all the same to me which of the whole set struck me* [italics added]. All I say is, that me and my poor vife will be killed at last by ‘em. They are all against us – all the Jews.

‘The Lord Mayor – Perhaps the defendants can clear up the matter?  
‘One of the defendants – I belong to the synagogue, my lord, and know these people well. I assure you that we invariably assist our poor if they deserve assistance, but these people are to our positive knowledge the very worst of beggars and imposters. They go about the streets in a variety of characters – sometimes they are to be found with turbans round their heads, with their children chaunting for pence in the streets, and acting in such a way as a Jew ought to be ashamed of. There are several in court who know their tricks, and that they act most disgracefully. It is, of course, disagreeable for us to be annoyed by such people; but to talk of blows is quite ridiculous. ...’

### 3. *OED3*: REVISED ORIGIN OF *KIBOSH*

We present the revised *OED3* entry below for easy reference:

**‘kibosh, n.**

**Origin:** Of unknown origin.

**Etymology:** Origin unknown.

Early evidence appears to be from colloquial and working-class English as spoken in London. There have been a number of attempts to trace the origin of the word; the following are the principal suggestions:

1. Some early uses suggest the *kibosh* may originally have been a physical object, used for striking, and the word has therefore been suggested to be < Arabic *kirbāš* (also *kurbāš*), denoting a kind of whip used for judicial punishment, or its etymon Ottoman Turkish *qirbāch* (see *kourbash* n.). If so, it may have been borrowed in London from immigrants or from those who served in the military in the Near East.

The pronunciation of the first syllable seems difficult to explain in this case; however, a form *kibosh* is also attested occasionally in the 19th cent. as a variant of *kourbash* n. For a detailed discussion of this suggestion compare G. Cohen, S. Goranson, & M. Little *Origin of Kibosh* (2018).

2. The word is also often taken to reflect an Irish phrase *caidhp bháis* (< *caidhp* coif, bonnet + *báis*, genitive of *bás* death: see *baser* n.). This phrase is variously said to denote the head covering worn by a judge when pronouncing a death sentence, the hood used at executions, the final item of clothing to be put on a body before wake and burial, or a form of torture (compare *pitch-cap* n. 2); however, the phrase does not appear to be attested in these senses except once with reference to burial customs (1935); otherwise it is used as the name of the fungus death cap (but this is probably a recent formation after English: see *death cap* n. at *death* n. Compounds 2). There is also no direct 19th-cent. evidence for a connection of the word *kibosh* to Ireland, although there was a sizeable Irish community in London. The syntax of the full phrase *to put..on* is similar to the common Irish construction *cuir..ar*, in the same literal sense (typically with reference to a physical item); however, an isolated Irish example *cuireadh an caidhp bháis air mar sgéal* ‘the *caidhp bháis* was put on your story’ (1924) is probably modelled on English *that put the kibosh on your story* .

3. Another suggestion takes the word to be of Yiddish origin, and there is an early example of it in Jewish usage in London (1835); however, no likely Yiddish etymon is recorded (although there have been various proposals for the further etymology of such a word or phrase, e.g. Hebrew *kābaš* to subject, to subdue, to tread down; compare also Hebrew *kibbeš* to subdue, which is < the same base).’

REFERENCES

B. & L. = Barrère & Leland

Barrère, Albert and Charles Godfrey Leland 1890. *The Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant*. 1889–1890. (Reprinted in 1967 by Gale.)

Beale, Paul – See below: Partridge 1984. Partridge & Beale approve Barrère & Leland’s etymology of *kibosh* (see above: pp. 5-6), evoking David Gold’s (2011: 113) sharp rebuttal. Gold also clarifies: ‘This note [by Beale], compiled by P.B. from existing entries in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of this *Dict.* and incorporating E.P.’s [Eric Partridge’s] additional material...’

Cohen, Gerald, Stephen Goranson, and Matthew Little 2018. *Origin of ‘Kibosh’*: Routledge Studies in Etymology. (London and New York: Routledge; Taylor & Francis). ISBN 9781138628953. The book gives 2018 as the date of publication, but it was in fact available already by mid-October 2017. The ‘cap-of-death-’ topic is discussed on pp. 98-102.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 2019. *Kibosh* update #4 (compilation). *Comments on Etymology*, vol. 48, #8, May 2019, 50 pages. Pages 7-8 contain ‘Clarification #1: A whip can be “put on”.’

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\_\_\_\_\_ 2020. Revisit to *kibosh* –rejecting the Irish ‘cap-of-death’ etymology. *Comments on Etymology*, vol. 49, no. 4, Feb. 2020, pp. 2-12.

Dodson, Stephen 2018. (Comment on *kibosh*). On his languagehat.com he commented favorably, June 15, 2018:

‘Yes, while I think everyone’s first reaction to the *kibosh* = whip idea is that it feels implausible, the evidence presented in the book is quite compelling.’ ---- And:

‘I wish there could be such a volume for every word with an interesting etymology.’

Gold, David 1989a. *Jewish Linguistic Studies*, vol. 1. Haifa: Association for the Study of Jewish Languages.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 1989b. ‘On the supposed Yiddish origin of the English noun *gazump* (with an appendix on other English words of Yiddish or supposed Yiddish origin)’ – in Gold 1989a: 26-34 [the word,

which has no Jewish connection, linguistic or otherwise, consists of English [*the price*] goes up and non-etymological /m/.’

\_\_\_\_\_ 1989c [mentioned as 1989e in Gold 2011 and therefore also in the quoted text above]. More on English *ganef* and other words. in Gold (1990b: 192-197).

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. 1990a. *Jewish Linguistic Studies*, vol. 2. Haifa.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1990b. Fiction or medieval philology (on Isaac E. Mozeson’s *The Word. The Dictionary that Reveals the Hebrew Source of English*. In Gold (1990a: 105-133).

\_\_\_\_\_ 2011. After at least 138 years of discussion, the etymological puzzle is possibly solved: The originally British English informalism *kibosh* as in ‘put the kibosh on [something]’ could come from the clogmakers’ term *kybosh* ‘iron bar which, when hot, is used to soften and smooth leather’ (with possible reinforcement from Western Ashkenazic British English *khay bash* ‘eighteen pence’). [G. Cohen: sic: long article-title]. in: *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 24.73-129. And see below: Valkemirer 2016.

\_\_\_\_\_ (by 2019; first posted: ?; see Valkemirer 2016). Online message by David L. Gold withdrawing the clogmaking ‘iron bar’ etymology he defended in Gold 2011. Website: <http://davidlgold.com/index.html> ; Gold writes here: ‘Note: I no longer believe that *kibosh* “iron bar...” is the source of *kibosh* as in *put the kibosh on* [...], but that sense (“iron bar...”) and another sense of *kibosh*, namely “Portland cement”, are etymologically important because, as a sememic analysis shows, they point in the direction of the immediate etymon of the word. I still hold to the section of the article dealing with the alleged Jewish origin of the word.’

Gosling, John 1959. *The Ghost Squad*. London: W.H. Allen.

languagehat.com – blog edited by Stephen Dodson, which for several years contained items on *kibosh*. (See above: Dodson 2018).

Lieberman, Anatoly 2018. Etymology Gleanings for October 2018.

<https://blog.oup.com/2018/10/etymology-gleanings-for-october-2018/>

---- Lieberman had been wrestling with ‘kibosh’ since at least 2010. His 2018 item presents a mixture of various thoughts about ‘kibosh,’ including mention of it being ‘this intractable word’ (with

regard to its etymology). But note his following comment made almost in passing:

‘The three authors [Cohen, Goranson, Little] provided enough material to make it probable that *kibosh* goes back to *kurbash* “lash”.’

Little, Matthew 2019. Solving a long-standing etymological mystery: origin of ‘put the kibosh on.’ Paper presented at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Biennial Conference of the Dictionary Society of North America, May 8-11, 2019, Bloomington, Indiana. ---- Printed in Cohen, Goranson, & Little (2019:35); its information is taken from Cohen, Goranson, & Little (2018:29-30) but without including the full references.

*MDIY*= *The Monumental Dictionary of Imaginary Yiddish*. 100 vols. The World Academy of Yiddishless Yiddish “Experts”. In preparation. [G. Cohen: This item: sic, listed in Gold (2011:126). Gold (*ibid.*: 114) writes: ‘...those two fantasies – which together with “Hebrew *kibosh*,” “Yiddish *kibosh*,” “Anglo-Hebraic *kibosh*,” the imaginary words reported in Gold 2009e and 1989e, and many others have won entry into the prestigious *MDIY*...’

Metcalf, Allan 2018. From criminal slang to modern acceptability. *Lingua Franca* (under aegis of the Chronicle of Higher Education), Sept. 27, 2018. The review of *Origin of ‘Kibosh’* is very favorable. <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2018/09/27/from-criminal-slang-to-modern-acceptability-kibosh/>

Partridge, Eric 1984. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English / Colloquialisms and Catch Phrases / Solecisms and Catachreses / Nicknames and Vulgarisms*. Eighth edition. Paul Beale ed. New York: Macmillan.

Tréguer, Pascal 2019. ‘Put on the kibosh’ in ca. 1830 poem *Penal Servitude!*; more evidence a whip can be ‘put on’, *Comments on Etymology*, vol. 49, #3, December 2019, pp. 21-36.

Valkemirer, Suzanne 2016. (reports that she received a letter from David L. Gold retracting his view that ‘kibosh’ in ‘put the kibosh on’ derives from the clog-making term ‘kibosh.’—June 9, 2016). <http://languagehat.com/liberman-on-kibosh/>

Zimmer, Ben 2017. Word on the street: putting the kibosh on an old riddle. (subtitle): Clues from an 1830 poem point to a long whip. [G. Cohen: Make that ‘approximately 1830’; the poem is undated, but internal evidence points to the approximate date.] *Wall Street Journal*, Saturday/Sunday, Dec. 30-31, 2017, p. C4, right-hand column. --- Zimmer’s key comment:

‘...The resulting book, “Origin of Kibosh,” in the Routledge series of Etymology, settles on a convincing origin story.’