



"Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth." Genesis 11.9

# ONE BAGEL, TWO BAGEL, THREE BAGEL

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Leo Rosten famously noted in *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968) that bagels are mentioned around 1610, in Jewish community rules (*takones*) from Krakow but he oversimplified a bit when he reported that "bagels would be given as a gift to any woman in childbirth".

Rosten's source was the text published in the Frankfurt Jewish historical journal *Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft* by the superb historian of Polish Jewry, Meir Balaban (1874-1942) who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Here is our translation:

"Circumcision celebrations should also be [under the same rules] as a wedding. The *vakh-nakht* ['watchnight' or 'vigil' traditionally held on the night before circumcision] may be attended by people who cannot serve as witnesses, two midwives, the wife of the *moyel* ['circumciser'] and the [wife of the] *sandek* ['godfather' who holds the child on his lap during circumcision] and aside from them – nobody else! The woman who gave birth and the wife of the *sandek* may not send for cakes or bagel or [twisted] challah; only midwives, and women who had assisted them may be sent [twisted] challah, and nothing other than that."

If anything, it's the twisted challah (*kitke*) that seems to have the special status here. Still the bagel was a well-established bakery-item, typically served with cake and challah at Jewish family

celebrations which we know because they are mentioned in the context of rules about the sending of these delicacies at special delicate moments.

In 1610, bagel had a zero-plural: one bagel, two bagel, three bagel. That survives in some parts of the English-speaking world, particularly in North America, among people who have some connection, even if one or two removed, to a Yiddish speaker. There are bona-fide bagel connoisseurs who respectfully insist on plural bagel, and do not cave in to the anglicised plural, bagels.

And, let us not forget the Great North-South Divide, better known as Litvaks (northerners) vs. the southern tribes: Póylishe, Galitsyáner, Volíner, Besaráber, Úngarishe and more. For the Northerners (and the various Ukrainian-area southerners), it's beygl (with the diphthong as in case or trait). For some of the southerners, and most emphatically all true Póylishe, it is baygl (approximating the diphthong in bike or bite).

London Yiddish had quite a Póylishe contingent at its formation, hence the survival of baygl, while the Litvaks (and their allies on this particular vowel) claimed the day in Liverpool, Scotland, Wales.

If you want to be classy when you talk about bagels, fight for the classic zero-plural form: five bagel, six bagel, seven bagel.

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