

Hameyvin Yavin: Language and Super Jews

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When people think about religion, they tend to think about individuals' beliefs and their adherence to laws and customs. As a trained linguist, I tend to think about their language. Do they express their faith in divine providence by peppering their speech with "Thank God," "God willing," or "God forbid?" Do they avoid cursing and taking God's name in vain?

Among Jews, the relationship between language and religion becomes even more interesting because of the additional layers of Hebrew and other Jewish languages. We can look not only at phrases individuals use or avoid but also at how they pronounce Hebrew and infuse their speech with structures from ancestral languages. Among contemporary American Jews, Yiddish/Ashkenazic Hebrew, Modern Israeli Hebrew, and English offer competing norms: do we study *Tórah*, *Toráh*, or *Toyre*? Are prayer shawls *tallitot*, *taleysim*, or *tallises*? Do we "learn out" something from a *Gemora* or do we simply learn it? When Jews use one or another of these variants they present themselves not only as Jews but also as certain types of Jews: older or younger, more or less connected to Israel, and more or less oriented toward textual mastery or strict halakhic observance.

As I have found in my ethnographic and survey research, language is an especially salient marker of Orthodox identification. This is not limited to divine expressions like *baruch hashem* (bless God), *chas v'shalom* (God forbid), and *mirtseshem* (with God's help: from *im yirtse hashem*); but also includes hundreds of words for religious rituals and concepts, for instance *toyvel* (immerse [as in objects] in a ritual bath), *aveyra* (sin), *gebruks* (soaked matzah, prohibited on Passover by some Ashkenazim); as well as hundreds of words used outside of the religious sphere, such as

leytsanus (silliness, buffoonery), *lichora* (apparently), and *yungerman* (young [married] man). Orthodox Jews, especially those closer to the right pole of the Modern Orthodox to Black Hat continuum, tend to use Ashkenazic patterns, including pronunciation of Hebrew *thaf* as [s] rather than Israeli [t] and the periphrastic verbal construction (e.g., "It might be meorer

neighbors, they are not the only ones with language interesting enough to analyze. Of course there are the children of immigrants from Iran, Russia, Israel, and elsewhere, who speak English with some influences from their native languages. There is the insular Syrian community in Brooklyn that maintains words from Judeo-Arabic in their English even two to

three generations after the major wave of immigration. And there are the secular Yiddishists, some of whom speak Yiddish "*az di tate-mame zoln nisht farshteyn*" (so their parents won't understand—a reversal of the generational trend). We might even analyze the language of Jewish communal organizations—such as the creative use of Hebrew and Yiddish in program names and the trend of JBranding (e.g., JDate, JSpot, JGooders).

But in my opinion, one of the most interesting groups to analyze linguistically is young non-Orthodox Jews who are highly involved in

Jewish religious life (henceforth referred to with the less unwieldy but more tongue-in-cheek phrase *super Jews*). In an Internet survey that I conducted with Steven M. Cohen, we asked respondents dozens of questions about their use of Hebrew and Yiddish words and other linguistic features, as well as about demographic traits. Using non-random "snowball sampling," the survey received more than 40,000 responses (see links on my HUC faculty webpage for details about methodology and findings). In the remainder of this article, I offer my analysis of the survey results about non-Orthodox super Jews, limiting the sample to the 23,004 respondents who grew up speaking English in the United States and who identify themselves as Jewish and not Orthodox.

First, we need a working definition of *super Jews*. While there are many options, Cohen and I decided that respondents must



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the *tayva* [arouse the lust] and "He was mek-arev me" [brought me closer (to Judaism)]). This is true not only of the majority Ashkenazic population but also of many Orthodox Jews of Sephardi and Mizrahi descent. We also hear Orthodox Jews using Yiddish-influenced syntax (e.g., "staying by them" and "We study all day Torah"), the word "so" used where English generally doesn't allow it (e.g., "If you'll come to us, so you'll see"), the hesitation click from Israeli Hebrew, and quasi-chanting intonation. Language is such an important part of American Orthodox identity (especially, but not solely, among men), that people refer to it as "Yeshivish" or "FrumSpeak," and *ba'alei teshuva*—non-Orthodox Jews who embrace Orthodoxy—pick up many of the distinctive linguistic features.

While Orthodox Jews are most distinct linguistically from their non-Jewish

meet at least two of the following three criteria: (1) attend services more than monthly; (2) have visited Israel three or more times or lived there; and (3) all or almost all of their friends are Jewishly engaged. According to this definition, 11 percent of this (non-Orthodox) sample is considered super Jews (674 individuals age 18–45 and 1,917 45 years or older).¹ We see differences between super Jews and non-super Jews at all ages, but the strongest differences are among those under 45. Results for this age group are presented in Table 1.

To what can we attribute these differences? One might guess that the rise of non-Orthodox Jewish day schools plays an important role. This may be partially true, but only a small percentage of respondents attended day school (see Table 1). Perhaps greater participation in informal Jewish education. The super Jews are somewhat more likely to have attended Jewish summer camps and participated in youth groups and college Jewish groups, but the differences are not huge.

American Jewish landscape. As the tongue-in-cheek label suggests, this can be an elitist identity. Many super Jews participate in a lay-led minyan (prayer group) in which members tend to be Jewishly educated and observant. In a minyan setting, public speech (including announcements and the *drash* or *dvar Torah*) and private conversations are likely to include Hebrew and Yiddish words and phrases and other insider language.

The linguistic profile of super Jews is epitomized by a phrase I hear periodically:

Table 1: Percentage of non-Orthodox Jewish respondents under age 45 who report that they . . .

	Not Super Jews	Super Jews
have excellent or good comprehension of prayer book Hebrew	14	70
have at least some comprehension of Talmudic Aramaic	20	71
use bentsh (say Grace After Meals, bless)	25	78
use drash (explanation, sermonic commentary)	15	72
use davka (specifically)	11	68
use kal vachomer (all the more so)	3	44
use balagan (mess, chaos)	16	77
use yofi (nice)	21	73
use heimish (homey)	25	68
use “Are you coming to us for dinner?”	29	55
attended Jewish day school	11	24
attended Jewish sleep-away summer camp	51	61

Crucially, non-Orthodox super Jews differ from other non-Orthodox Jews in their language skills. Especially in the younger group, they are much more likely to report excellent or good Hebrew skills and at least some comprehension of Talmudic Aramaic. Second, they are much more likely to report using many of the Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic words we asked about, especially in the religious domain. They are much more likely to report using Israeli Hebrew words, which is not surprising given that many of them have spent time in Israel.

Young super Jews are significantly more likely than non-super Jews to use Yiddish words that are most common among their parents and grandparents, like *macher* (big shot), *naches* (pride), and *heimish* (homey). Super Jews even report more use of Yiddish-influenced grammar, such as “Are you coming to us for dinner?” and “She has what to say.”

I argue that the major factor in the distinctive linguistic profile of non-Orthodox Jewish elites is their interaction with others like them. Anyone who attends synagogue more than monthly, has spent significant time in Israel, and/or reports that most of their close friends are engaged in Jewish life (the three criteria we used to define super Jews) likely has regular conversations with others like them. In addition, almost half of young super Jews in the sample refrain from handling money on Shabbat, which suggests that they may also host and/or attend Shabbat meals regularly. We know from studies around the world that people who talk to each other on a regular basis often converge linguistically. Participating in Jewish religious and communal life offers Jews ample opportunity to converse with others like them and to learn and spread Hebrew and Yiddish words.

Non-Orthodox super Jews are crystallizing into a distinctive group within the

“hameyvin yavin,” meaning “Those in the know will understand.” I asked some friends how they use this ultimate insider phrase, and one replied, “Since I work in Hebrew Bible and Rabbinics, often giving public lectures at synagogues or Jewish community centers I’ll allude to something heretical or politically controversial but not spell it out. I’ll tell others ‘I’m saying X, and hamevin yavin.’” This phrase offers a fine example of the richness we can discover when we analyze the relationship between language and religion, especially among super Jews.

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