

up *pretty well* the lingo.” There are distinctive ways of pronouncing some English vowels and consonants. And, of course, there is the quasi-chanting intonation used to indicate phrase boundaries in Talmud study, which has transferred into everyday speech as rise-fall contours.

When people become Orthodox, they make decisions — conscious or not — about which words to take on and which pronunciations to use.

While words are the most prominent element of Orthodox language, pronunciations are often critical in distinguishing different groups of Orthodox Jews. As part of an online survey I conducted with sociologist Steven M. Cohen, we asked respondents how they pronounce the holiday of Tabernacles: Israeli Hebrew “Sukkot” (Soo-COAT) or Ashkenazic/Yiddish “Sukkos” (SUK-kiss). Self-identified non-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jews were more likely to say “Soo-COAT,” and Orthodox and Black Hat, or Haredi, Jews, were more likely to say “SUK-kiss.”

We see the same pattern with the greeting used between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Non-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jews tend to say, “*Gmar cha-tee-MAH to-VAH*”; Orthodox Jews toward the middle of the continuum are more likely to say, “*Gmar cha-SEE-mah TO-*

vah”; and those toward the Black Hat pole are more likely to say, “*Gmar cha-SEE-mah TOY-vah*,” exhibiting the most influence from Ashkenazic Hebrew.

When people become Orthodox, they encounter this vast landscape of sociolinguistic variation, and they make decisions — conscious or not — about which words to take on and which pronunciations to use. Whether they say “HA-la-KHAH” or “ha-LUH-khuh” and how much they change their grammar helps others identify them not only as Orthodox but also along the continuum between Modern Orthodox and Haredi.

BTs can also use language to remind others that they were not always Orthodox. Although some BTs adopt Orthodox language as fully and quickly as they can, others never adapt completely, avoiding certain pronunciations or grammatical constructions and maintaining some of their original slang. As one BT told me, “If someone said ‘Just keepin’ it real, *mamish*,’ I would know they’re definitely BT.” Same goes for a man wearing a black hat with a T-shirt and trendy sunglasses or a woman who prepares her gefilte fish with Indian spices. Language — like other elements of culture — allows BTs to indicate not only that they are a certain type of Orthodox Jew, but also that they are *ba’alei teshuvah*. 

Accent: The Politics of Poetry and the Sound of Hebrew

MIRYAM SEGAL

In December 2001, Gene Simmons, the former lead singer of KISS, began by correcting his interviewer’s Hebrew:

Gene Simmons: *Oh, thank you so much [for the introduction] and since this is National Public Radio and it prides itself on accurate information — most of it sounded good — I stand guilty as charged and proud to say that I’m a mama’s boy. However, point one is you mispronounced my Hebrew name. It’s not Hayim, which is the sort of sniveling, please-don’t-beat-me-up Ashkenazi European way . . .*

Leonard Lopate: *Which is what I grew up in . . .*

Gene Simmons: *Which is — hey, that’s why you get beaten up. I don’t. The Sefaradit way is the correct way. It’s Hayim, emphasis on the second vowel, like the Israelis do.*

Gene Simmons, a.k.a. Chaim (or Hayim), was focused on one particular aspect of Hebrew pronunciation: the stress pattern. He was not correcting Lopate’s Ashkenazic *het* to conform to the gutturals of some Sephardic pronunciations, for example, but simply insisting that Lopate stress the final syllable “like the Israelis do.” (In fact, names are an exception to the rule; Israelis pronounce Chaim with a “sniveling” penultimate stress.)

One hundred years before this interview, the use of a terminal-stress pronunciation was almost unheard of in the poetry (and even the speech) of Ashkenazic Jews in Europe and Palestine. But poets were about to enter a period of sonic confusion.

Israeli Hebrew is the grandchild of the pedagogic organizations of pre-state Palestine. We commonly speak of a “Sephardic accent,” but in the 1900s, the language-planning teachers

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rejected the Galilean dialect (adapted by a teacher from Lebanese and Syrian Jewish pronunciation), despite its great success in this period of “revival.” Instead, they chose what I call a synthetic accent — made up of elements from a variety of Hebrew accents and languages.

This system was *not* the precursor to today’s Hebrew. That honor belongs to another sound system, also a hybrid, with a terminal-stress pattern (and other elements of Sephardic Hebrews) and an admixture of Ashkenazic sounds. In short, the schools failed to establish their synthetic accent. They succeeded, however, in integrating the terminal-stress system that has with some minor changes been the rule for standard spoken Hebrew ever since. This token of authenticity was variously, even simultaneously, associated with the Land of Israel as distinct from the Diaspora; with a masculine (I-don’t-get-beaten-up) Jewish identity; as well, oddly enough, with women (don’t tell Simmons!) — the supposed purveyors of authentic-sounding Hebrew and an authentic identity rooted in ancient Hebrew culture.

In the final few decades of the 19th century, some, like Ahad Ha’am, thought that Hebrew literature had reached a dead end that could only be bypassed by a solution to the larger Jewish political problems. This was not unreasonable. All the ingredients of a successful vernacular literature were available — a glorious literary precedent (the Hebrew Bible), a population of readers — all but the vernacular itself, a Hebrew of everyday usage.

Then, Hebrew poets Haim Nachman Bialik and Shaul Tchernichovsky revolutionized Hebrew poetry. They integrated the kinds of rhythms recognizable from other European poetry — in the iambic pentameter of

Shakespeare, for example. Unlike the Haskalah poetry of the 18th and 19th centuries, these poems fully acknowledged their Ashkenazic sounds. They had to. Rhyming, accentual-syllabic poetry doesn’t let you lie about your pronunciation — certainly not about where the stress falls. Readers could hear the rhythm, the music of this new kind of Hebrew poetry only if they read the poems in some kind of Ashkenazic dialect. By integrating accentual-syllabic rhythms, Bialik and Tchernichovsky had succeeded in writing poetry whose musicality depended on the rhythms of speech. They did this just as the revival of Hebrew as a vernacular was beginning. The poets’ bad luck was that the teachers chose a Hebrew in which their poetry would lose its rhythm.

For a couple of decades in the early 20th century, a poet might not know what to do: write in a disappearing Ashkenazic Hebrew as the national poet Bialik did, or compose in the new accent despite the anxiety that such Hebrew was hopelessly monotonous. Some poets hedged their bets by writing free verse whose rhythm would be far less sensitive to a stress shift. Bialik accepted his Hebrew’s fate; Tchernichovsky objected to his poems being read in the new accent; teachers fretted over Hebrew’s lack of a literature through which to teach proper Hebrew — one half of the vernacular-language-and-literature pair so essential to nationalism was missing.

This pedagogic necessity explains why children’s poetry was the first poetic genre in which the new accent appeared. Only in the 1930s was it so clear to a poet in Palestine that his or her readers expected the new accent that even Tchernichovsky started composing in it!

Poetry had once again joined her vernacular. 

Ethics continued from page 16

for the parents until age 21. Another fiction: that birthright citizenship is a primary incentive for illegal immigration. Anyone truly interested in identifying primary incentives would plot a graph of U.S. economic indicators and then overlay it with data on the number of illegal border crossings. One would find: It’s the economy, stupid!

The restrictionists justify the morality of such positions by arguing that “illegals,” after all, are hopping the fence and crashing our party. But the true metaphor is that yes, we are having a party and there are people outside our

fence. They need jobs and we need help — serving food to our guests, cleaning up afterward, and caring for our children. So we invite them in and employ them. But when economic times get tough, as they are now, we blame immigrants for job losses.

Until we fully acknowledge and resolve this hypocrisy, our nation’s commitment to being what the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus described as a refuge for the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” will remain unfulfilled, and our society’s quest to move from darkness to light incomplete. 

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