

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SIMEON D. BAUMEL, *Sacred Speakers: Language and Culture among the Haredim in Israel*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006, x + 202 p., glossary, index.

The world of ultra-orthodox Jews has attracted much attention from scholars and the public. What puzzles many is how and why the ultra-orthodox continue to survive and even grow in a “modern/post-modern” world. Here are people whose lives are circumscribed by exacting and detailed religious rules and regulations that deal with all aspects of existence, even something as mundane as which shoe one must take off first at night (the left one, of course). To outsiders it may appear that the ultra-orthodox are all alike or at best they may be aware of distinctions between Hassidim and non-Hassidic Haredim (ultra-orthodox).

Sacred Speakers, based on Baumel’s doctoral dissertation, is an attempt to show the complexities of this world and examine how it relates to modernity. He does this by examining the language (or languages, to be more accurate) and culture of four ultra-orthodox groups: two Hassidic ones, Gerrer (Gur) and Lubavitch (Chabad); and two non-Hassidic groups, Mitnagdim (anti-Hassidic) and Sefaradi Haredim in Israel and the Diaspora. The first three groups are Ashkenazi (i.e., European) and the fourth is Middle East/North African in origin.

Baumel identifies four languages that play a role in the world of the ultra-orthodox: “Loshen Kodesh – the Holy Tongue” which he defines as Talmudic Hebrew; modern spoken Israeli Hebrew which he refers to as “Ivrit”; Aramaic which is the primary language of the Talmud and its study; and “Yiddish” which has some significance for the Ashkenazi groups, both culturally and religiously. He examines the use of these languages in three basic spheres of culture: public life (including communal newspapers and magazines), the home (i.e., the domestic sphere) and within the multiple educational systems that the various groups run.

By examining the role of language in these areas, his study moves beyond a simple linguistic investigation to a much broader socio-cultural examination of this world. He documents differences in language use between the groups, which reflect differences in historical origins and world views. Additionally, and more importantly, he discusses in detail the differences in language use between the genders, which reflect cultural

attitudes as to the proper and different roles of men and women. For example, men are more familiar and make more use of Aramaic than do women. This is not surprising since Aramaic is the language of the Talmud, which ultra-orthodox women do not study. In many ultra-orthodox groups women work to support their families in the outside world while their husbands study in yeshivot (where the Talmud and other religious texts are studied intensively). Thus they are becoming more familiar with Ivrit and other languages than their spouses.

Baumel also notes the group differences that are reflected in a number of the magazines and newspapers which are published by the four groups. He observes that the publishers are well aware of their target markets and cater to them in terms of language, content and style. Many publications are geared to a particular ultra-orthodox group (though there are some general ones) or to a particular gender, once again reflecting the gendered nature of this world which is reflected in most aspects of collective ultra-orthodox life. In any case, the language used is circumscribed by religious requirements, regulations and world view.

Two of the more significant language-related findings of the study are the slow decline of the use of Yiddish among Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox and the growing use of Hebrew slang, particularly among the young. Yiddish is being replaced as the language of daily discourse by modern spoken Hebrew. It is less common today to hear children using Yiddish as a language of normal conversation in ultra-orthodox neighborhoods than was the case 20 or 25 years ago.

The observation about the intrusion of Ivrit slang in the language of the younger ultra-orthodox is interesting since a significant proportion of this slang develops out of army experience. This experience is something that the ultra-orthodox avoid. For those of us who have gone to the army and whose children have also gone, the use of army-related slang may appear to be odd, to say the least. However, it can be viewed as an indication of the permeability of the social and cultural walls surrounding the ultra-orthodox.

Unfortunately, the sections on the Sefaradi ultra-orthodox and the Diaspora communities seem to be “last minute” additions. They are relatively short and not as detailed as the discussions of the three Ashkenazi groups.

Baumel’s decision to examine the Sefaradi ultra-orthodox by focusing on the followers of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and the political movement that he directs, the Shas Party, is reflective of this. For example, by not examining the various branches of the influential Abuhatzera family, a fuller insight into the language and culture of the Sefaradi ultra-orthodox is missed. The key difference being that the Abuhatzeras are oriented towards Jewish mysticism (like the various Hassidic groups), while Rabbi Ovadia Yosef has little or no time for this side of Judaic tradition. This difference is profound and has far-reaching implications in terms of language use and culture that could have been noted, or even better, examined.

The section on the four groups in the Diaspora (Great Britain, America and France) is the most problematic. Baumel indicates that he did not do extensive fieldwork for this section but rather used existing sources, many of which are dated (in at least one case more than 30 years old – and not even about the particular Diaspora community) and does not provide a contemporary picture of the complexities of these Diaspora ultra-orthodox communities and how they relate to their surrounding secular societies.

As a result, he missed one of the more significant recent developments in the American ultra-orthodox community – the growth of accreditation of Rabbinical and Talmudic schools (yeshivot) as post-secondary educational institutions. There is now an accreditation agency, The Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools, which accredits at least 59 institutions (yeshivot), all of which offer at least a bachelor's degree and a number that even offer masters and doctorates (all degrees are in "Talmudic studies"). All are ultra-orthodox. What this accreditation means is that all have to deal with various agencies of a secular government (including the US Department of Education) which is something that would never happen with their counterparts in Israel. This is another indication of how these groups have adapted to the secular world that surrounds their communities.

As well, Baumel makes no mention of a number of important issues which have a direct impact on how ultra-orthodox individuals interface with the surrounding secular community in Israel. There is no mention made of the influence of cell phones and the internet in this world, around which there is much controversy. For instance, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, the leading rabbinic figure in the non-Hassidic Israeli ultra-orthodox world, recently published a ruling that only those who have "kosher" cell phones will be able to register their children for ultra-orthodox schools. A kosher cell phone is one without internet access. Additionally, he has recently forbidden ultra-orthodox women from receiving academic degrees (this "decree" was made after Baumel's book was published but there were rumors circulating in the ultra-orthodox communities that it was to be expected long before he made his pronouncement).

The dangers of the internet are well known in the ultra-orthodox world. That Baumel does not deal with the issue is a true weakness of this book. The interplay of computers, the internet and the ultra-orthodox is significant. Strange kinds of permutations are part of this interplay. For example, I was talking to an ultra-orthodox friend who fixes computers and has them in his home but does not have television (a benchmark of the ultra-orthodox home). He began to tell me about professional wrestling. Needless to say, we were both surprised. I, when he told me that he watched it over the internet, and he, when I told him that it was all scripted.

Additionally, I am sorry to say, that the book is most annoying because of poor editing. Things are asserted as "facts" without any reference or data. This happens often enough to make one stop and ask "where is the support,

reference or data” and to start questioning some of Baumel’s findings. All too often, as I was reading, I was brought up short by a sentence that made absolutely no sense. On a second reading, it was easy to see that some word or another had been left out or something not related had been included. Perhaps, the oddest error occurs on page 132 of the text. Baumel writes that he “visited fourteen schools and yeshivot....” And, on the very next line he writes: “Eight were girls’ schools and five were boys’ school.” All that can be said about this is “sloppy, way too sloppy.”

In the end, the book is worth reading despite the problems alluded to above and others not mentioned (for example the rather jarring use of the term “sect”). Baumel does a good job exploring the complexities of the ultra-orthodox world in Israel and some of the various socio-cultural means, including language, that are used to preserve this unique lifestyle in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. But what should be kept in mind is that it could have been so much better.

There is a final question that normally is not dealt with in a book review but in this case should be. Is the book worth buying? This is a harder question to answer. There is no price listed on the book but a quick look at the publisher’s website shows it listed at \$85.00 (US). I know that Canadians, like Israelis, have become accustomed to paying much higher prices for books than Americans. But even if *Sacred Speakers* had no problems, this is rather pricey for just 202 pages of text.

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