

SARAH BUNIN BENOR: *Becoming Frum. How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism*, 288pp., Rutgers University Press, ISBN: 978-0813553894, 2012, \$27.95 (paperback)

Since the growth of the *baalei teshuvah* movements from the late 1960s and 1970's, there have been many scholarly books that have documented "haredization", the so called "shift to the right" and religious intensification of Jewish communities. The renewed interest in Jewish observance, in particular in Orthodoxy, seems to be part of a broader global spiritual trend, but in contrast to other religions, the Jewish revival may also have an ethnic aspect, the desire to (re)connect, (re)discover, (re)learn the religion of the ancestors.

Sarah Bunin Benor's fascinating book *Becoming Frum, How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* guides the reader through the transition process of born-again Jews into the world of Orthodoxy. The newcomers were usually brought up in non-Orthodox or secular homes as opposed to the *frumers*, who were born and raised Orthodox. Since Herbert M. Danzger's 1989 book *Returning to the Tradition* there have been many comprehensive academic studies on born again Jews<sup>1</sup>. What makes Benor's book special is that she focuses on the adult language socialization of *baalei teshuvah*. *Being Orthodox* involves not only religious practices, observance, or religious beliefs, but also a set of speaking practices and a distinct language, called in the book "Jewish language". This book describes how the *baalei teshuvah* turn their lives around and adopt the *frum* orthodox lifestyle and the *frum* way of speaking "Yinglish", "Jewish", or "Orthodox".

According to the author, *baalei teshuvah* exist in a cultural borderland between their non-Orthodox upbringing and their new *frum* communities. Benor's aim is to describe and understand how they navigate this borderland, how they negotiate their own "in-between-ness", how they construct their identities between their old and new lives, between their

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<sup>1</sup>Danzger, Murray Herbert: 1989 *Returning to Tradition. The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism*. London: Yale University Press New Haven. Kaufman, Debra Renee: 1993 *Rachel's Daughters. Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. Davidmann, Lynn: 1991 *Tradition in a Rootless World. Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkley, Los Angeles, Oxford: California Press. Minny E. Mock-Degen: 2009 *The Dynamics of becoming Orthodox. Dutch Jewish woman returning to Judaism and how their mothers felt about it*. Amphorabooks, Amsterdam.

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past and present, between their original families and their new surroundings.

Benor is not only a cultural anthropologist but also a linguist and an expert on “Jewish language” or languages. Combining the two disciplines she analyses how and to what extent the newcomers incorporate Yiddishisms into English, how frequently they use religious phrases (eg “Baruch Ha Sem”), whether they choose the Ashkhenazi pronunciation of “Mazel tov” or the Israeli pronunciation, how some indicate their Sephardi roots by using Ladino phrases, and how these new ways of speaking express their desire to blend in and help them find their own status and position in the community.

Through this book we gain a deep insight into the complex and diverse cultural and religious differences along the Orthodox continuum. A whole chapter is dedicated to the relationship between language and the different orthodoxies from the Modern Orthodox to the so-called “Black Hat” Orthodox. Language, appearance, and observance plays a major role in how baalei teshuvah represent their transformation and how they are perceived. The intensity and “properness” of the use of biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, Israeli Hebrew and the other linguistic cues, reveal one’s location along various social axes and serve as indicators of the schools and yeshivot where people studied, identity, knowledge, their sense of security, confidence, and the stage their process of becoming frum. However, while trying to integrate, the newcomers also influence the speech of those who are frum from birth.

Orthodox Jewish English does not only involve a special Jewish vocabulary with an Ashkenazi or Israeli pronunciation, it also means a very distinct grammar. The fact that most native English speaking baalei teshuva adopt the use of phrases that are grammatically incorrect in English, but make sense in Yiddish and are customary in Orthodox communities, is a symptom of “third generation ethnic revival”. This means that while first generation immigrants struggle in learning the language, their children are careful to speak and sound “correct” in order to integrate and to distinguish themselves from their immigrant parents. However, their children, the third generation, might want to take greater pride in their distinctive heritage and they feel more comfortable with being American and having a special ethnic background. Besides the radical lifestyle change, they express their newly found religious Jewishness by speaking like their grandparents or great-grandparents. This conscious symbolic linguistic “return” to their grandparents’ culture causes tension between the baalei teshuvahs and their parents.

Benor gives a number of examples of linguistic borrowings from Yiddish. A number of prepositions are used with influences from their

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Yiddish correlates, especially “by” and “to”. “By”, from the Yiddish “bay”, the German “bei” and the Israeli “etsel”, means ‘at’, ‘besides’, ‘near’, ‘about’, ‘around’. The use of these prepositions are transferred to Orthodox English, for example instead of “at the mikveh” most would say “by the mikve” or: “are you eating by Rabbi Fischer?” “By” is often used in the sense of ‘according to the opinion of’, but in Orthodox English it is used as in the Yiddish: “Who’s Reb Yehuda holding by” or: “I pasken by him”. Not surprisingly the most common usages of by among baalei teshuva in the early stages are in the sense of “at someones house”, “I spent Shabbos by them”. This usage of “by” is considered to be a characteristic of Orthodox Jewish language in particular, and much less frequent in general Jewish English.

The book examines the “return” process as a model of transitioning that has different stages from peripheral belonging to becoming an inside member of the community. In line with this process the author distinguishes stages that baalei teshuva tend to go through as they acquire Hebrew and Yiddish words, choose and learn a pronunciation and adopt the grammar, the gestures etc. This stages include: hearing a word without understanding or even noticing, hearing the word in a context that facilitates understanding or remembering it, asking or looking up for the meaning, using it with a mistake, using it in a marked way, often playfully, and eventually using it correctly and unselfconsciously.

Benor points out another typical baal teshuvah phenomenon that my own research in Europe has supported as well. She calls this the “Matsiyahu Phenomenon”. Matsiyahu was once a secular singer, became a long bearded Hasidic “black hat” raggae star who recently has shaved his face clean but still wears kipah and tzitzis with sneakers. His story is a good example of someone who dives headfirst into frum culture and then bounces back to reclaim elements of his previous life. Some baal teshuvah change their mind, and leave completely, some find a balance they can live in, some try to prove themselves by “hyperaccommodating” to blend in.

What makes this book so useful is that it is based on ethnographic sociolinguistic research in which the author not only visited and interviewed people, but as a non- Orthodox fieldworker participated in the every day life of the communities, made close friendships, attended family events, becoming an active member these communities while she was walking the path of a newcomer toward becoming an insider herself. Therefore her account has a very personal tone but is at the same time deeply analytical. Having written a book on Hungarian Jews and the baal teshuva movement in Hungary, I could relate to the chapters describing the difficulties of the fieldwork or the dilemmas of analyzing in a rigid

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academic framework those people who during the research became close friends. By spending several months in several different communities she could observe and examine the living spoken language: real dialogues, real situations, language errors, mistakes, slips of the tongue.

**Dr Zsófia Kata Vincze, ELTE Budapest University**