

# 'FrumSpeak' can be a barrier to understanding



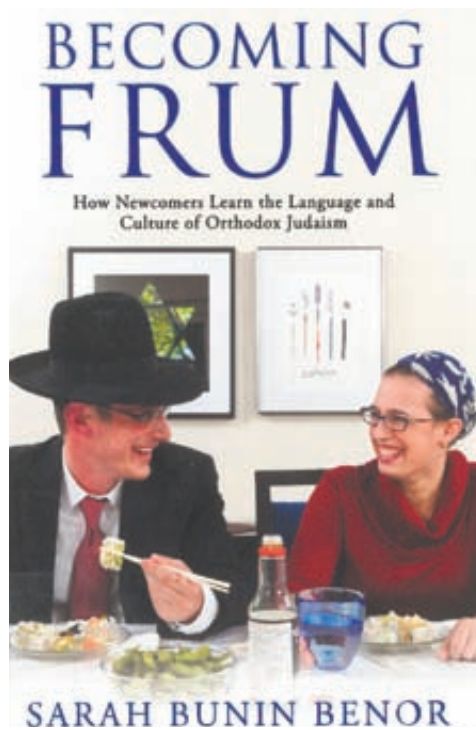
**Views & Reviews**  
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*Becoming Frum:  
How Newcomers Learn the Language  
and Culture of Orthodox Judaism*

**Sarah Bunin Benor**  
Rutgers University Press

In this book, Sarah Bunin Benor explores the kind of English that you sometimes hear in Orthodox Jewish settings in North America. Some call it "FrumSpeak," from the Yiddish word "frum" (religious).

Benor shows how, when speaking among themselves, religious Jews pepper their English with loan words from Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish. Even



their English syntax can be influenced, as in the sentence "I live here already eight years." Standard English uses the present perfect tense ("I have lived here for eight years"), but Yiddish conveys the idea of the present perfect through a present tense verb plus the adverb *shoyn* ("already"). Thus the sentence in Yiddish is "*Ikh voyn do shoyn akht yor.*" Even if they don't know Yiddish, some Frum-speakers use this syntax in their English.

I enjoyed some of the examples in this book and learned a few things about the English that I hear in some Orthodox settings. But I was not as impressed by the lengthy socio-linguistic analysis of religious Jews, both the newly observant, who learn FrumSpeak as adults, and those born into religious families. Many population subgroups have their own unique way of speak-

ing English. When doctors talk about medical issues or senators at my university discuss government initiatives on education, the in-group members use acronyms and jargon that exclude speakers of standard English.

That Jews develop their own version of "gentile" languages is not news. For the last 2,000 years, whenever Jews spoke German, Spanish, Arabic or French within their communities, they always "Hebraized" that vernacular language.

The real news is that most North American Jews speak and understand only standard English, since they have no direct or indirect influence of any Jewish language, and do not live or gather in Jewish enclaves where a patois like FrumSpeak makes sense.

For rabbis and educators this situation presents a dilemma: do you speak in the special language of your in-group, thus bolstering group identity and pride, or do you take pains to speak English that is accessible to all, hoping that your message might interest even those outside the in-group? Conservative and "Open Orthodox" educators generally opt for the second model, even if they happily speak FrumSpeak in an insular setting. FrumSpeak can become a real liability when its speakers do not even realize they are excluding others.

Benor's book does not address this issue directly, but it got me thinking about whether religious Jews make Jewish observance accessible to the non-expert. We have a proliferation of user-friendly prayer books with English translations and detailed explanatory notes. But one publication that I consider essential for religious Jewish life, the *luach*, (calendar) has always been written in the most obscure Hebrew imaginable.

Every fall I dutifully buy a copy of the Ezras Torah *luach*, an inexpensive publication that gives detailed ritual instructions for each day of the Jewish year. The *luach* tells you the precise Torah reading for Purim morning; for home use, it tells you what *Kiddush* to say on the seventh night of Passover. I find the book indispensable. But very few people buy it, because the Hebrew is so inaccessible that only someone who has spent years in a yeshiva can understand it. Non-standard acronyms are on every page. How many Jews can decipher what *vav-bet-lamed-tzade-gimel* stands for? (Hint: it's the abbreviated name of a prayer recited toward the end of the weekday morning service.) Ezras Torah has started to publish an English version, but navigating that book also requires expert knowledge.

This year I discovered a *luach* that is accurate and still user friendly—*Luah Hashanah 5774: A guide to prayers, readings, laws and customs for the synagogue and the home*, by Rabbi Miles B. Cohen and Leslie Rubin. Rabbi Cohen

is an accomplished scholar of Hebrew who has managed to rise above FrumSpeak to produce this day-by-day guide to Jewish practice that can be followed by any reader of standard English. Leslie Rubin, his wife, contributes her significant professional editing skills, and the result is beautifully laid out with helpful coloured printing and drawings (even coloured pictures that show how to set up and light candles each night of Chanukah).

Published by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the book is primarily aimed at a Conservative Jewish audience, providing page numbers for the Conservative movement's most commonly used prayer books. I did not find many significant liturgical differences between this *luach* and the old-fashioned one. The most significant difference was that the Cohen/Rubin *luach* recognizes that Israel Independence Day (Yom Ha'atzmaut) requires liturgical changes in the prayers while Ezras Torah treats it as just another weekday. The vast majority of modern Orthodox synagogues do observe Israel Independence Day, but they use the antiquated non-Zionist *luach* of Ezras Torah, and improvise when Yom Ha'atzmaut comes around.

Rubin and Rabbi Cohen have shown



that it is possible to present the intricacies of religious Judaism, bolstering Jewish (and Zionist) knowledge, identity and pride, while writing a book that is esthetically pleasing and accessible. Their book serves as a fine example of how members of an in-group can issue a welcoming invitation to those who might consider joining.

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