

## ▲ Yiddish

from Page 1

respondents how religious they are or whether their grandchildren will be Jewish, Benor and Cohen asked questions like, “When you say ‘Mary’ and ‘merry’ in regular speech, do they sound the same or different?” and “How do you refer to the Jewish skullcap?” By hitting the question of Jewish identity at a slant rather than head-on, the researchers have come up with an unusually nuanced portrait of contemporary American Jews.

“Patterns of language use can tell us things about identities and communities that might not even be known to the actors themselves,” said Cohen, who has been conducting Jewish identity surveys of the more direct variety for some four decades. “There are things we can see through the side door that we can’t see through the front door.”

Benor and Cohen’s survey technique, like the questions they asked, was untraditional. Instead of using a random survey sample, they employed a “snowball technique,” e-mailing the survey to 600 friends in July 2008 and asking respondents to forward it in turn. They make clear in the introduction to their report that this approach has both its advantages and its drawbacks.

On the one hand, 41,696 people completed the survey just in the first few weeks of its life on the Internet. (You can still take the survey online, though only data from those first 41,696 respondents has already been analyzed.) By contrast, the National Jewish Population Survey, conducted every 10 years by Jewish Federations of North America (the umbrella group of local Jewish federations formerly known as United Jewish Communities), has a sample size of about 5,000. On the other hand, Benor and Cohen acknowledge, “We know it over-represents Jews with strong Jewish engagement and social ties” – the kind of people most likely to take such a survey of their own volition.

As Benor expected from her previous scholarship (like Cohen, she teaches at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform movement’s seminary, which sponsored the survey), the data suggests that for the most part, American Jews across the religious spectrum draw from the same “repertoire” of distinctive speech elements – that is, they are English speakers who use varying amounts of Yiddish or Hebrew phrasing and grammar to distinguish themselves both from non-Jews and from Jews elsewhere on the spectrum. With the exception of those fervently Orthodox

Jews who use Yiddish as their primary language, Benor said, American Jews fall somewhere on this “continuum of distinctiveness” rather than being separable into different dialect groups.

“My favorite example is ‘gmar cha-tee-MAH to-VAH,’” she said, enunciating each syllable of the traditional Yom Kippur greeting: in English, “May you be inscribed in the book of life.” “That’s the most modern Hebrew pronunciation you can get. Then there’s ‘gmar cha-TEE-mah TO-vah,’ ‘gmar cha-SEE-mah TO-vah,’ and then ‘gmar ch’SEE-mah TOY-vah.”

For those in the know, each pronunciation signifies a different spot on the religious continuum: a non-Orthodox Jew probably would use the modern Hebrew pronunciation; as you move along the spectrum of observance, the greeting becomes more Yiddish-inflected.

One of the key findings of the survey was what Benor and Cohen call “the growth of linguistic distinctiveness among the Orthodox.” Distinctive strains of Yiddish-inflected English are not only still in everyday use among younger generations of Orthodox American Jews, their prevalence is growing. Take the phrase, “She’s staying by us,” which borrows a Yiddish grammatical construction to mean, “She’s staying at our place.” Fifty-three

percent of Orthodox Jews who took the survey use the phrase (versus 21 percent of non-Orthodox Jews). But a full three quarters of Orthodox Jews between the ages of 18 and 24 use it, compared to 12 percent of Orthodox respondents 75 or older. According to the report, “such words and phrases are so important for Orthodox identity that many baalei teshuva (newly Orthodox Jews) make a conscious effort to incorporate them into their speech, even when some people consider them to be incorrect English.” Observant Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, whose ancestors never spoke Yiddish in the first place, have adopted Yiddish religious terminology as well.

Benor attributes this to the fact that Orthodox communities have in general become more conservative, politically and culturally, in recent years. “Part of that shift to the right is a linguistic shift: some Jews who used to use less distinct English are now incorporating more Yiddishisms into their English,” she said.

In non-Orthodox Jewish communities, two trends are happening concurrently, the survey found: As members of an older generation die and takes certain language patterns with them, younger Jews are using more Yiddish and Hebrew than before (and certainly more than their more

see **YIDDISH** page 17 ►

## STOCKTON PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Where the Arts Come Alive!



**SISTER'S CHRISTMAS  
CATECHISM**  
December 5



**SOUTH JERSEY AREA WIND  
ENSEMBLE HOLIDAY CONCERT**  
December 7



**ATLANTIC CITY BALLET  
THE NUTCRACKER**  
December 11 & 12

*Don't miss the excitement!*



For tickets call the Box Office  
(Monday - Thursday, 9 AM - 3 PM) at 609.652-9000

