On Jewish Languages, Names, and Distinctiveness

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When Gerson Cohen sat down to prepare his 1966 Hebrew Teachers College commencement address,¹ he was faced with a decision: in which language should he deliver the speech? Hebrew would have been an appropriate choice, given the Hebraist orientation of Hebrew Teachers College. English would also have been appropriate, given that it was the primary language of Cohen and most of his audience members (and perhaps the only language of some of the graduates’ guests). Cohen decided on a compromise: he began his remarks in Hebrew (unfortunately the transcript begins after these opening words, so we do not know what he said), and then he gave the bulk of his speech in English. But his English was not simply English; it incorporated a number of Hebrew words, such as “Torah,” “shekel,” and “alef”; hybrid Hebrew-English words like “mishnaic” and “geonic”; and several phrases quoted from rabbinic literature and Ahad Ha’am, uttered in Hebrew and then English translation (for example, “shelo shinu et malhehem, they even retained their distinctive form of clothing”).

Cohen’s choice of language was not just practical; it also reinforced the message of his speech: that the graduates should look positively at “the age-old problem of assimilation,” including Jews’ adoption of local names and language. He implied that the newly minted teachers and scholars should address their less Jewishly educated American Jewish communities in English rather than Hebrew: “As young men and women trained to read and understand classical Jewish sources in their original languages, you will also contribute to the unending chain of Hebrew literary creativity and to the revitalization of Hebrew thought and expression.

I hope that you will do so in popular as well as in professional terms, so that the best of your thought and research is made available to all levels of the community.” By delivering his address mostly in English, he demonstrated that a scholar can discuss traditional Jewish sources in an erudite way in a language other than Hebrew. And by incorporating elements of Hebrew into his English, Cohen modeled for the graduates of Hebrew Teachers College the appropriate use of “Jewish English,” which they might proceed to use with their students.

In this essay I argue that the existence of Jewish English and other diaspora Jewish languages offers evidence for Cohen’s analysis of “assimilation” as an important factor in Jews’ historical vitality. I also argue that the distinctiveness of Jewish English—the incorporation of Hebrew words and other distinctive features—calls for a tweak to Cohen’s message: Jews have survived not only because they have assimilated to local cultural norms but also because they have distinguished themselves. Indeed, in the decades since Cohen’s speech, both the names and the Jewish English of religiously engaged American Jews have become increasingly distinct, incorporating more and more influences from Hebrew and Yiddish—a development I view as evidence of American Jewish vitality.

Near the beginning of his address, Cohen cites Bar Kappara’s sermon: “Owing to four factors were the people of Israel redeemed from the land of Egypt: they did not alter their names (i.e., Egyptianize them); they did not change their language; they did not spread malicious gossip; and they were free of sexual license.” It makes sense that a rabbinic sermon would focus on issues of morality, such as sexual behavior and gossip. But why are language and names important enough to mention? Bar Kappara composed these words because of his anxiety about the Jews around him assimilating culturally rather than maintaining distinctively Jewish language and names. Cohen counters this stance, saying, “To a considerable degree, the Jews survived as a vital group and as a pulsating culture because they changed their names, their language, their clothing, and their patterns of thought and expression.”

However, even naming conventions reveal this dynamic of distinction folded into assimilation. Yes, Menachem went by Paregoros in the Greek

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2. A note on terminology: Since Cohen’s address, the term “assimilation” has been critiqued and discarded by many scholars of Jewish history. See the discussion of these critiques in Beth A. Berkowitz, *Defining Jewish Difference: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2012). After considering alternative terms—“acculturation,” “integration,” and the like—I settled on “assimilation” so my analysis would remain in line with Cohen’s words.
milieu, but he used his Hebrew name in Hebrew documents (as Cohen points out). In Eastern Europe, Tzipoyre-Feygl and Tzvi-Hirsh combined European and Hebrew names (although for those outside of Germanic locales, even their Germanic name was a marker of distinctiveness). And today, Emma and Ryan might go by their Hebrew names, perhaps Esther and Reuven, in Hebrew class and when they are called to the Torah for an aliyah.

Cohen is right to point out that most diaspora Jewish communities picked up the local language after they migrated to a new territory or after a new language was introduced following a conquest, with the exceptions of Yiddish, Ladino, and other “post-coterritorial languages.” For example, Jews in Arabic-speaking lands spoke Judeo-Arabic; Jews in southern France spoke Judeo-Provençal; Jews in Kerala, India, spoke Judeo-Malayalam; and Jews in America today speak Jewish English. Scholars refer to these languages with a “Judeo-” or “Jewish” modifier because they are distinct (to varying degrees) from the languages used by surrounding non-Jews. Cohen’s emphasis on assimilation neglects this linguistic distinctiveness.

In what ways have Jewish languages diverged from their local non-Jewish correlates? A common source of distinction has been influences from Hebrew and Aramaic, especially loanwords (words from one lan-

3. That is, languages maintained after a migration or after the local population shifted to another language, including, e.g., Ladino—a Hispanic language spoken several generations after Iberian Jews migrated to the Ottoman Empire, surrounded by speakers of Greek, Turkish, etc. This term is used because the languages are no longer coterritorial with their non-Jewish base languages. See Sarah Bunin Benor, “Towards a New Understanding of Jewish Language in the 21st Century,” Religion Compass 2.6 (2008): 1062–80.


5. Some might refer to these as dialects of Arabic, Provencal, Malayalam, and English rather than as separate languages. The distinction between language and dialect is not straightforward, as it can appeal to sociopolitical issues, in addition to mutual intelligibility. I use the term “Jewish languages” to refer to the entire continuum of Jewish ways of speaking and writing that differ to varying extents from their non-Jewish correlates.
guage used within another language) and textual quotes. Researchers have compiled thick dictionaries of the hundreds of Hebrew and Aramaic loanwords used in specific Jewish languages, including Yiddish, Ladino, Jewish English, and Judeo-Arabic. These loanwords—pronounced and incorporated in various ways in various languages—are used not only to refer to specifically Jewish concepts like Sabbath, matzah, and bar mitzvah but also to discuss non-Jews, taboo concepts, and many other matters, including those that have perfectly functional alternatives in the local language. For example, Judeo-Isfahani (a Median language spoken in Isfahan, Iran) includes the Hebrew words obahrit (morning prayer רחובת), guym (gentile(s) שבויו), shezim (jinni עלינו), and hokhmah (wisdom חכמה).

Before the advent of widespread literacy, Jewish languages were generally written with Hebrew letters, using various conventions to represent vowels and the non-Hebraic consonants of the local language. For example, in some varieties of Ladino, noches (nights) is written נочים, while in Yiddish the same sounds would be written נאכחים. Today, due primarily to increased literacy worldwide, most Jewish communities write their languages in local scripts, sometimes inserting Hebrew words in Hebrew script.

Although Hebrew (combined with Aramaic) plays the most important role in Jewish linguistic distinctiveness, it is not the only source. Many Jewish languages incorporate elements of ancestral Jewish languages. As an example, here is a sentence from contemporary Jewish Swedish, which includes several loanwords from Hebrew and from Yiddish, the language spoken by many of the ancestors of contemporary Swedish Jews: "Det var en bris i shul förra shabbes, och bland alla jidden fanns även några gojim" = There was a bris (circumcision ceremony) i shul (in the synagogue) last shabbes (Sabbath), and among all the jidden (Jews) pres-

ent, there were also a few *gojim* (gentiles). In addition to these lexical influences, ancestral and immigrant Jewish languages sometimes influence the grammar and pronunciation of the newly acquired local language.

Aside from these language contact features, several Jewish languages include archaic uses of the local language, misplaced regionalisms, and other distinctive features of pronunciation and grammar, sometimes significant enough to make the Jewish and non-Jewish languages unintelligible. In combination, all of these features distinguish the speech and writing of Jews from that of their non-Jewish neighbors to varying extents. In some cases, Jews reserve their distinctive features for in-group speech and are able to speak the local language without identifying themselves as Jewish, and in other cases their Jewishness is evident whenever they speak, whether they intend that or not.

Along this continuum of distinctness, the most distinct languages are post-coterritorial languages like Yiddish and Ladino, which were maintained for centuries after migrations surrounded by mutually unintelligible languages (Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, etc., in the case of Yiddish; Greek, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, etc., in the case of Ladino). Ironically and surprisingly, Cohen mentions Yiddish and Ladino as examples of linguistic assimilation, because they are forms of Spanish and German, not Hebrew. I would argue that post-coterritorial Yiddish and Ladino are better seen as exceptions to the norm of historical Jewish linguistic assimilation.

When Jews have picked up the local language following an immigration, they have often followed a pattern hypothesized by Joshua Fishman. Among immigrants and their children, those who interact more with non-Jews acquire a variety of the local language. Gradually, this language is acquired by those who have less contact with non-Jews, and they use the language with an increasing number of distinctive features,

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especially words from Hebrew and Aramaic. This is the pattern followed by Jewish American English.\textsuperscript{13} In the decades since Cohen delivered his address in 1966, Jews have increasingly used language and names (the two cultural domains Cohen highlights) that are distinct from those of their non-Jewish neighbors.

We see evidence of this transition in a study of the Jewish press: articles from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency from 1923 to 2010 and from Pittsburgh Jewish newspapers from 1901 to 2010.\textsuperscript{14} This study found an increasing use of certain Hebrew and Yiddish words, such as shul, daven, and chutzpah, beginning in the 1960s and spiking in the 1980s. Similarly, documents from the Reform movement show a transition—mostly in the 1970s—from Sabbath to Shabbat and increasing numbers of words from Hebrew, such as mitzvot (commandments, good deeds), aliya (immigrating to Israel), tikkun olam (repairing the world), and zichronah leverachah (may her memory be for a blessing).\textsuperscript{15} These examples of increasing use of Hebrew and Yiddish in English prose indicate that three generations after the mass wave of immigration, Jews felt comfortable enough in America to express more distinctiveness in their in-group language. The changes are also in line with American ethnic practices more generally: in the 1970s it became more acceptable to highlight one’s ethnicity. In the case of the Reform movement, the increasing use of Hebrew also represents growing reverence for Jewish tradition and Zionism.

Another area of increasing Jewish distinctiveness is names. I am not aware of a general study of American Jews’ naming practices in the last few decades. Such a study could be conducted by examining the registration records of Jewish day schools and supplementary schools. I expect that such a study would indicate that Jews engaged in religious life transitioned to using more distinctively Jewish names, not just popular Americanized biblical names like Sarah and Jacob but also Hebrew names that were less popular among Americans more generally, like Matan and Liora.

In the absence of such research, I conducted an analysis of primarily

\textsuperscript{13} Benor, “American Jews,” 269.
Table 1. New York Social Security data for girls’ names, 1940–2011: Average tokens of each name per year within 5-year periods

Table 2. New York Social Security data for boys’ names, 1940–2011: Average tokens of each name per year within 5-year periods
Orthodox names in New York State, using data available from the Social Security Administration. I selected New York State because it has the largest number and highest concentration of Jews—over 1.6 million, 8.4 percent of the overall population—and the largest number and highest concentration of Orthodox Jews, estimated at 493,000 in 2011. There is no data available on whether the parents who selected these names for their babies were Orthodox Jews (or Jews). So I selected 20 names (10 boys’ and 10 girls’) that I believe to be used almost exclusively or primarily by Orthodox Jews, based on my ethnographic research in Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish communities. I tracked these names from 1910 to 2011. I found zero tokens of the names from 1910 to 1941, a few tokens of some of the names in the 1940s through the 1960s, and a mostly steady increase in all of the names from the 1970s to 2011. In tables 1 (girls) and 2 (boys) I present this data from 1940 to 2011.

The Orthodox community that lived in the United States (including New York State) before the 1940s was not insular. They tended to send their children to public schools and to give their babies Americanized Hebrew names like Judah, Isaac, Hannah, and Rebecca, as well as non-Hebrew names like Charles, James, Barbara, and Marilyn. Some of them may have also used Hebrew and Yiddish names informally, even if their official names were not distinctly Jewish. Starting in the mid-1940s, New York saw an influx of Orthodox Holocaust survivors, many of whom identified toward the Haredi (what many scholars refer to as “Ultra-Orthodox”) end of the Orthodox continuum. These immigrants tended to be more insular, maintaining Yiddish and sending their children to private Jewish schools. It is in this postwar period that distinctly Orthodox names began to rise in popularity. The incidence of these names is low through the 1960s, perhaps indicating that the Haredi Jews were giving their children official names like Solomon and Rebecca while using Shloimy and Rivky in their everyday lives. It is also likely that many Orthodox Jews through the 1960s gave their children an American name and maintained their Hebrew/Yiddish names only for ritual purposes.

The rapid increase in distinctly Orthodox names began in the 1970s, for a few reasons. First are the factors discussed above—comfort in American society and trends toward valorizing ethnic difference. Second

is the birth rate: there are more instances of Orthodox baby names because there are more Orthodox babies. Third, the last few decades have seen a shift to the right among Orthodox Jews, also known as Haredization.\textsuperscript{18} As Heilman, Ferziger, and others have discussed, this shift involves more stringent religious observance, emphasis on textual norms over inherited tradition, decreasing concern with secular education, more gender separation, and increasing social and cultural insularity. One factor in this trend is a transition from Orthodox Jews participating in the public school system to almost universal yeshivah/Jewish day school education. The gap year in Israel plays a role, as does the influx of Haredi teachers in American Orthodox schools. One element of Haredi culture is a strengthened cultural connection to Eastern Europe, which manifests itself in language and names: more Yiddish words, Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew words, Yiddish grammatical influences in English,\textsuperscript{19} and Eastern European names, such as those in the figures above.

Not all segments of the American Jewish community have become more distinct in their language and names. If we were to study a random sample of Americans who identify as Jewish, we would probably find that a large percentage of them speak less distinctly and have less distinctive names than their parents, in line with the general trend of many Jews away from densely Jewish neighborhoods and Jewish communal engagement. But among Jews who are involved in religious and communal life—exemplified in this essay by Orthodox Jews in New York State, documents of the Reform movement, and articles in the Anglo-Jewish press—we find increased distinctiveness over the decades since Gerson Cohen’s speech.

If Cohen were to deliver a similar speech at a similar institution in 2016, I posit that his language would likely include more Hebrew loanwords, in line with the new norms of the American Jewish community.


\textsuperscript{19} See Benor, \textit{Becoming Frum}.
For example, he might say lashon hara’ rather than “malicious gossip” and Bne Yisrael rather than “Israelites,” and names like Reuben, Simeon, and Aaron might take more Hebraic forms, Reuven, Shimon, and Aharon.20 A similar speech today might also include English-origin Jewish English buzzwords like “texts,” “engagement,” and “continuity.”

Even in 1966, just before the increase in Jewish linguistic distinctiveness, Cohen felt it was appropriate to deliver his speech at Hebrew Teachers College in a combination of English and Hebrew. He started in Hebrew, perhaps to demonstrate his Hebrew bonafides, perhaps to indicate a shared love of the language so revered at Hebrew Teachers College and in similar circles, and perhaps to mitigate the points coming later in the speech, in which he implies that the graduates should speak and write in English for the Jewish masses they will be teaching. Then, in the bulk of his speech, he demonstrates how this can be done by delivering his message in English with a few Hebrew words and quotes.

At the end of his address, Cohen compares Torah to a path with freezing cold on one side and consuming fire on the other. “We must all work our way to the middle so that we can derive the benefits of both the coldness and the warmth.” Although he does not explicitly extend this analogy to cultural assimilation, I believe this extension is warranted. On one side is the option of complete assimilation, on the other extreme insularity. While some Jews will inevitably opt for one of these extremes, most have taken a middle path, combining assimilation with distinctiveness. And I believe this is a blessing.

20. It is possible that Cohen did say them this way but, in line with the conventions of the day, they were transcribed according to English norms.