**From Ideology to Halakhah: Haredi Opposition to Modern Hebrew**

**Iris Baron (Haussmann)**

**Introduction**

Ever since Eliezer Ben Yehuda struggled to revive the Hebrew language and transform it into the spoken tongue of the Jews in the Land of Israel, his efforts were the subject of controversy and conflict.[[1]](#footnote-1) Once Hebrew’s victory had become a fait accompli, however, these conflicts faded away, leaving only sporadic reverberations. Today, calls are sometimes heard to reinforce the status of Hebrew, accompanied by localized opposition to such demands, mainly in the context of the growing presence of English in Israel, a phenomenon taking place in many Western countries.[[2]](#footnote-2) These debates have a localized character and do not reflect a systemic ideological struggle against the spoken language in the State of Israel. This ideological calm is also reflected in the public’s attitude toward Yiddish. During the struggle over Hebrew, Yiddish was perceived as the enemy of Hebrew and was boycotted by advocates of the latter. Now, however, it is enjoying something of a resurgence in the State of Israel and has even been recognized as a language worthy of preservation and nurturing. It can be concluded that the struggle over the status of Hebrew in Israel, and the status of Yiddish as a language of Exile, has long since been resolved and is no longer the subject of discussion. Today’s debates relate more to the questions that preoccupy speakers of different languages around the world, such as the extent to which it is proper to recognize words from the spoken form of a language as standard words, or the extent to which foreign words should be absorbed in the language. On the margins of Israeli society, however, in the Haredi Jewish community, a lively and fierce debate continues to rage over the status of Modern Hebrew and of Yiddish. This community does not maintain a monolithic stance on the issue, and it is possible to identify fascinating changes that have occurred since the late nineteenth century.

Opposition to Hebrew in the Haredi community changed over the course of time. Initially, the reservations and opposition concerning Hebrew formed part of the reaction to the innovative activities of secular Zionists. Since Modern Hebrew was not conceived and born in a sacred setting, it was immediately perceived as problematic, despite the fact that it was depicted as a continuation of the beloved “Holy Tongue” of the Bible. This paradoxical situation produced an extensive literature rejecting Modern Hebrew on primarily ideological and educational grounds. Later, during the second stage of resistance, opposition to Hebrew also acquired a pseudo-Halakhic tone that sought to strengthen and entrench the objections to the use of Hebrew after it had already become a fait accompli. The fact that Modern Hebrew was perceived as a continuation of the holy tongue now formed part of the objections to its use.

The two stages I have presented are clearly represented in the sources and can be delineated in chronological terms. The **first stage** of the debate can be defined as the period from the early revival of Hebrew through to its consolidation as the dominant language in the Land of Israel – roughly from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s.[[3]](#footnote-3) This period was characterized by a fierce struggle between the exponents and opponents of Hebrew – a struggle that was waged in several arenas and did not only involve the Haredi from the Old Yishuv. As Hebrew secured its place as the dominant the language, the debate entered its **second stage**. Haredi Jewry now stood out clearly as the only source of objection to the use of Hebrew, whether this objection was purely theoretical, as in the case of the “Litvaks,” and certain Hasidic circles, or implemented in practice, as has been the case with most of the Hasidim and the Jerusalem zealots.

As Dalia Asulin Berman has pointed out, the groups that retained their loyalty to Yiddish saw this position as part of a broader commitment to the original cultures of the Jews in Eastern Europe.[[4]](#footnote-4) Just as the Haredim seek to preserve the customs, prayer styles, dress, and other trappings of the shtetl, so they also seek to preserve the language that was used in this environment. The preservation of Yiddish helps both to reinforce the identity of these groups and to create a barrier dividing them from other groups.[[5]](#footnote-5) Most of these groups are Hasidic: in the Litvak sector, Yiddish is not perceived as a component of identity and has been abandoned almost entirely in favor of Modern Hebrew.

Haredi Judaism, particularly during the second stage (from the 1930s through to the present day), can be divided into three principal wings. The central wing, which is represented politically primarily by Agudat Israel and its satellite political parties, includes most of the East European Hasidic dynasties and most of the Litvak yeshivas. The conservative (or extremist) wing comprises mainly the Hungarian Hasidic dynasties (Satmar and Munkacs) and the separatist circles that developed in Israel (HaEdah HaHaredit and Neturei Karta). The moderate wing essentially consists of Poalei Agudat Israel, together with a number of individuals who maintain a positive affinity to the Zionist enterprise. My discussion here will concentrate mainly on the first two wings.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Today, it can be asserted that the Litvaks have adopted Hebrew and view Yiddish almost as a foreign language.[[7]](#footnote-7) By contrast, a high level of variance can be seen on this matter between the different Hasidic dynasties. Use and command of Yiddish among Hasidim varies according to such factors as communal affiliation, age, occupation, place of residence, and so forth.[[8]](#footnote-8) It used to be said that the Ger Hasidim “have forgotten Yiddish,” but this seems to have been something of an exaggeration. In any case, in recent decades this dynasty has seen a clear return to Yiddish. Among Chabad in Israel Hebrew is completely dominant, as is the case in many parts of the Breslov community, which is based largely on *ba’alei teshuva*. In all the other Hasidic dynasties, the language of speech and study is Yiddish, although many Hasidim switch between Yiddish and Hebrew freely. Moreover, Hebrew has exerted a growing influence on Yiddish in Israel over time, to the point that even someone who does not speak Yiddish may be able to follow the gist of a conversation in the language.[[9]](#footnote-9) In any case, only the most conservative circles, and particularly the Yerushalmi sect and the Hungarians, have maintained a firm and stubborn insistence on using Yiddish, speaking in Hebrew only in their contacts with the “outside” world.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The changes that occurred in the attitude of Haredi society toward Hebrew are not only of interest in their own right, but also provide an interesting case study on the emergence of a binding norm. At the end of my article, I shall attempt to show how and why an ideological or educational norm may over the years become a more binding Halakhic norm, and to identify the tools that encourage such a transition.

**The First Stage: Opposition to Modern Hebrew on Ideological and Educational Grounds**

The campaign against Hebrew in the Old Yishuv had a paradoxical character. On the one hand, these circles were careful to avoid the use of Modern Hebrew. On the other, their letters and various testimonies reveal their sense of discomfort at their own opposition to Hebrew, which was considered the holy tongue, and the conflict between their opposition and their love for this language. At the time, it was argued in the press that the language revivers had created “new words we have never seen or heard since the day we became one people.”[[11]](#footnote-11) However, such innovations cannot imply the creation of a completely new language. Indeed, the chief accusation raised in these arguments was that the new words were defacing the “holy tongue,” and such a charge is relevant precisely because of the assumption that Modern Hebrew can indeed be identified with the holy language. The dominant tone is criticizes Modern Hebrew severely for trampling on ancient Hebrew: “the beautiful holy language, pleasant in expressions, has been plundered and trampled upon.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The explanations offered for the refusal to use Hebrew had an ideological and educational character, but not a halakhic one. Opposition focused mainly on symbolic aspects; the members of the Old Yishuv were concerned about the educational ramifications of using Hebrew, and particularly about the changes this could cause in Jews’ consciousness and **identity**.

By way of example, Rabbi Benzion Yadler (1871–1962), who was also one of the pioneers of education for Haredi girls in Jerusalem, warned of the alienation between the Yiddish-speaking generations of grandparents and parents and the younger generation of Hebrew speakers. Yadler claimed that the elders’ influence on the new generation was waning due to difficulty communicating. He described an incident he observed that had a profoundly negative impact on him, apparently motivating him to open an educational institution for girls:

I was shocked one day when I happened to find myself in the home of an elderly rabbi’s wife in the settlement of Petach Tikva and heard her little grandson asking her to bring him one of his clothes. Because she did not understand his request, which was made in Hebrew, she brought his hat. The little grandson burst out laughing and said, “Grandma has already gone crazy!” And if this is the situation regarding mundane matters, how much more serious is it if the young are laughing at the elderly in heavenly matters.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The abandonment of Yiddish in favor of Hebrew leads not only to scorn regarding “mundane matters,” but also to a deterioration of the learning of Torah and the observance of the commandments (“heavenly matters.”) Indeed, after this anecdote, Yadler goes on to comment about the serious condition of girls due to the abandonment of Yiddish and the adoption of Hebrew: “Young women who cannot read Yiddish have stopped reciting the supplications, requests, and prayers written in the prayer books that their mothers used to say from the depths of their hearts before lighting the candles. And even the few commandments they observe are performed without taste and sweetness, to the point that they are completely abandoned, Heaven forefend.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus Yadler claims that the language gap between the parents and their children disconnects the latter, and particularly the girls, from the broad cultural infrastructure that was created in Yiddish, replete with the piety of past generations.

Yadler explains that precisely because girls are not bound by the commandment to study Torah, and indeed are prohibited from doing so (particularly according to the approach of the conservative Haredi wing), it is vital to ensure that they refrain from using Hebrew, since the Torah does not protect them and they are exposed to the influence of the material they study. He also quoted the traditional justification for the prohibition against girls learning Torah – their presumed “light-headedness” – and asserts that this means that they are “much more readily influenced by studies of heresy and apostasy.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Yadler emphasizes the broad character of the influence of Hebrew on the younger generation: “Those who desecrate the Sabbath in public do so in Hebrew. They desecrate the Sabbath in Hebrew, and in Hebrew they attract young boys and girls to secular education.” His sweeping conclusion regarding the public as a whole, but particularly women, is that they must avoid speaking Hebrew and prefer Yiddish: “This is why we do not speak Hebrew; it is better to speak ‘Yiddish’ and not to join the Sabbath desecrators.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

It was in this spirit that Rabbi Yadler founded the School for Girls in Jerusalem, with the support of the leaders of the Old Yishuv. The school emerged against the background of a phenomenon connected with the developments discussed above: the growing appeal of the new Hebrew-language schools, particularly for girls, for whom there was no alternative Haredi framework. The regulations of the school emphasize not only the content of the studies, but also the language of study. In regulation B.3, Yadler declares that one of the goals of the institution is to teach “Penmanship, correspondence, and arithmetic – and this specifically in Jargon.”[[17]](#footnote-17) In regulation D, he establishes in general terms that “all the above-mentioned studies and the spoken language in the ‘Cheder’ will be specifically in ‘Jargon,’ and not in any other language, such as Hebrew or such like. Even greetings will be specifically in ‘Jargon,’ as will the term of address for the teachers, such as *rebbetzin*, rather than *gveret*.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

However, the main concern of opponents of Modern Hebrew seems to have focused on its possible impact on the consciousness and **identity** of Jews. The fact that it was secular Jews who were promoting this change, establishing the use of spoken Hebrew as part of a new Jewish identity, cast the use of the language in speech in a negative light, even if such use was not a priori unacceptable. The opponents’ comments create an impression of regret that it was the secular Zionists, rather than the members of the Old Yishuv, who had taken this initiative. A poignant expression of this position can be found in comments attributed to Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (1849–1932), the first rabbi of HaEdah HaHaredit. Sonnenfeld’s student Rabbi Moshe Blau, leader of Agudat Israel in Jerusalem, recalls that Sonnenfeld once commented to him:

You know? Maybe we were wrong not to introduce the holy tongue as the spoken language when we came to the Land of Israel. Then we would have come before the secularists, and we would thereby have removed their strongest weapon […] Since there is no prohibition *per se*, we should perhaps have acted first, rather than now being forced to respond negatively since the secularists have taken it for themselves and made it a principle.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Rabbi Sonnenfeld’s comments are clear and explicit: The question of the spoken language used by Jews is not a halakhic issue.[[20]](#footnote-20) The main consideration is to defend the Haredim against secular Jews who have turned the use of Modern Hebrew into a central and cardinal part of their Jewish identity.

A similar approach emerges, albeit implicitly, in a letter written by Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teumim (1843–1905, known by the acronym “Aderet,”) the chief rabbi of Jerusalem. The rabbi, who was the father-in-law of Rabbi Kook, wrote the letter in 1904/1905, shortly before his death at the request of Rabbi Benzion Yadler in order to strengthen opposition to the use of modern Hebrew among the zealots.[[21]](#footnote-21) In his letter, the Aderet uses the now-familiar argument against the adoption of Hebrew as a spoken language, claiming that “they (the modernizers) have based the entire Torah on study of Hebrew and history,” whereas in fact “study of the Hebrew language is not a religious principle, but merely a precondition to the study of our Holy Torah.” The use of Hebrew was regarded as a means of sabotaging traditional education, since it had become a replacement for the Torah and commandments; accordingly, it was vital to struggle against the use of the language.[[22]](#footnote-22) This letter was quoted a few years later (in 1906/1907) in a letter sent by leaders of the Old Yishuv in Jerusalem to the Jewish community in Beirut.[[23]](#footnote-23) A similar approach is evident in a letter signed by Rabbis Yitzhak Yeruham Diskin, Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, and Moshe Nachum Wallenstein in 1908/1909,[[24]](#footnote-24) as well as in various proclamations.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This concern regarding Hebrew was raised not only among the Ashkenazi Haredi public, but also within the Sephardi community in Jerusalem. It was expressed succinctly by Rabbi Yosef David Halevy (1867–1930), a prominent Sephardi rabbi in the Land of Israel who served as one of the leaders of the Aleppo community and as rabbi of the Bucharian neighborhood in Jerusalem.[[26]](#footnote-26) In a letter sent in 1927/1928 to the Jewish community of Buenos Aires concerning a question about the adoption of Hebrew as the language of tuition in the Talmud Torah in that city, Halevy replied that the community should not take this step. His arguments were similar to those we have seen above. Halevy did not quote sources to support his position, and it is apparent that the rabbi took it for granted that the question was essentially an educational, and not a halakhic, one. Halevy, too, clearly felt uncomfortable about the impression that he was attacking Hebrew, and made no distinction between the ancient Hebrew language and the modern tongue (a distinction we will find later): “Woe betide me if I say, and woe betide me if I do not say, that the study of Hebrew, which is the holy tongue of our forefathers, may not be used. How shameful and disgraceful.”

These comments show that Halevy attaches a positive value to the spoken use of Hebrew. However, this value is not the sole consideration, and other factors must also be taken into account. In the final analysis, he determines that other considerations take precedence. Firstly, on the immediate educational level, “we can see with our own eyes that various defects come from the study of the Hebrew language, because of newcomers who write treatises in Hebrew and speak in Hebrew, and who flout the Torah, and whose treatises are no more than words of apostasy and heresy, lust and filth, and so forth.” Secondly, Hebrew is being used as a tool to build a new Jewish identity detached from the Torah and commandments: “They (the Zionists) believe that in order to have the label ‘Yaudi’ (sic.) it is sufficient to speak Hebrew and to be a national Jew, without religion.” Halevy accuses Zionism of abandoning all its other religious and cultural assets. Nationalism, manifested in language, is seeking to replace religion. Accordingly, he firmly concludes that the use of another language should be preferred to Hebrew.

Opponents of the use of Hebrew likened this practice to the religious question of wine that has been touched by a gentile or a desecrator of Sabbath: the wine itself is Kosher, but it is defiled by the touch of the disqualified individual.[[27]](#footnote-27) Another analogy was to compare the issue to the prohibition against reading the Ten Commandments during the prayer service before reciting the traditional “Shema” prayer, lest the apostates claim that the Ten Commandments constitute the entire Torah.[[28]](#footnote-28) These and similar analogies underline the principle that while Hebrew *per se* is a positive value, it must be rejected when used in a negative manner. Accordingly, while there is no prohibition against speaking Hebrew, and while some even argued that it was a commandment to do so,[[29]](#footnote-29) such a practice becomes improper once it has been “usurped” by the secularists.

All the sources we have quoted above show that the broad position in Old Yishuv circles was to avoid the use of Hebrew as a spoken language, without establishing any **halakhic** prohibition against this practice. Indeed, the Haredi individuals we have reviewed here were clearly uncomfortable with their own opposition to the language, due to its identification as the “holy tongue.” However, we may suggest by way of a hypothesis (as I shall examine in greater depth below) that even at this stage, a pre-halakhic or quasi-halakhic norm had already emerged regarding the use of Hebrew. This norm was not the product of the learned exposition of the sources, but rather reflected a “ritual instinct” (to use the term coined by Jacob Katz)[[30]](#footnote-30) that apparently emerged from “the ground up” as much as from the rabbinical leadership. The distasteful sight of Sabbath-desecrators using the language of the Torah was an affront to those faithful to the tradition on the most immediate level, and almost automatically led to the assertion that it was “prohibited” to act in the same manner. This instinctive feeling then evolved into an ideological opposition. In the second stage of the struggle, however, this ideology would develop a far more textual and systematic argumentative infrastructure, at least in the case of the conservative Haredi wing. In some instances, it would even be expressed in halakhic terms.

**The Second Stage: From Ideology to Halakhah**

The first stage of the polemical struggle against Hebrew was developed mainly by the Yerushalmi Haredim (as well as the Hungarians). The Haredi mainstream only joined the struggle in its second stage, when ironically the victory of Hebrew in the Jewish community in the Land of Israel was already a fait accompli. In this stage, two key changes can be seen on the ideological level: Firstly, and most importantly, Haredi discourse regarding the Hebrew language increasingly acquires a **quasi-halakhic character in the form of a “prohibition”** based not only on concrete and contemporary considerations, but also on extra-temporal factors. Secondly, this stage sees the development of the argument that Modern Hebrew and the holy tongue are two separate languages – an argument I shall refer to below as **the argument of linguistic separation**. This argument develops both within the mainstream of Haredi Judaism, which did not prohibit the use of Hebrew, and in the conservative wing that advocated the avoidance of the language.

As we have seen, opposition to Hebrew was due mainly to educational considerations relating to the negative influence of those who spoke the language, and their exposure to undesirable content and even to the shifting of Jewish identify from observance of the Torah and commandments to the status of a “normal” nation whose identity is shaped by a common language, territory, culture, and so forth. In the second stage, discussion of the status of Hebrew shows a gradual transition from educational and ideological discourse to quasi-halakhic discourse. This line of argument is particularly salient in the conservative wing of Haredi society, which seeks to attach a generalized and ostensibly extra-temporal argument to the prohibition against speaking Hebrew.

Two of the most prominent opponents of Modern Hebrew were the Admor Rabbi Yoel of Satmar (1887–1979) and the Admor Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda of Sanz-Klausenberg (1905–1994). The two rabbis were related and maintained similar positions until they parted ways following the Holocaust: the Admor of Satmar maintained his extreme anti-Zionist position, whereas the Sanz-Klausenberger Admor adopted a relatively flexible position on contemporary issues, while continuing to adhere to the strictest conservative rhetoric. As we shall see, however, the two rabbis continued to share similar positions in terms of their opposition to the use of Modern Hebrew and their promotion of Yiddish.

The point of departure adopted by both rabbis was the argument that the holy tongue, as its name implies, is indeed a sacred language. The question then arises as to whether, in light of this status, it is meritorious to speak in this language, or whether – precisely because of its holy character – certain restrictions apply regarding its use for sacred matters only, as well as restrictions concerning Hebrew speech in improper settings, such as the bathhouse or the toilet. The Sages and halakhic arbiters rule that the holy tongue may be spoken even in the toilet or the bathhouse.[[31]](#footnote-31) Indeed, the Sages’ remarks suggest that the spoken use of the holy tongue was regarded as a worthy virtue. Thus, for example, Rabbi Meir is quoted in the Jerusalem Talmud as declaring: “Anyone who is permanently settled in the Land of Israel and speaks the holy tongue and eats of its fruits in purity and reads the Shema morning and evening is assured of his place in the World to Come.”[[32]](#footnote-32) As we saw in the first stage of opposition to the use of the holy tongue, there was a sense of discomfort at the idea of negating the use of the holy tongue as a spoken language. During the second stage of the opposition, however, this status became one of the arguments used for imposing a prohibition against the use of spoken Hebrew.[[33]](#footnote-33)

As we shall see, the two Admorim – Satmar and Klausenberg – make extensive reference to Hebrew’s “holy” character to support their position that its use as a spoken language should be avoided as far as possible, and that it should be left as a purely ritual language used for prayer and Torah study.[[34]](#footnote-34) How, then, do they confront the fact that the halakhic tradition does not impose any restrictions on the use of the holy tongue? It appears that, like other conservative Admorim, they both adduce conclusions from the living tradition of their times, that is, that Jews do not speak Hebrew. They argue that the use of spoken Hebrew ended with the exile of the Jewish people, at the latest.[[35]](#footnote-35) Due to its elevated status, Hebrew had never been intended to serve as the spoken language of the general public; and due to the principle of the “decline of the generations,” even Torah scholars have stopped using the language in everyday settings. Another Admor, Rabbi Sholom Dovber of Lubavitch (1920–1960), argued earlier that this situation should certainly continue in modern times, as the generations have declined still further and “people are not even aware of its sacred value.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The Admor of Satmar developed an elaborate theory positing that the holy tongue had always been used solely for ritual purposes, and that even the patriarch Abraham used the spoken language of his day, which was not the holy tongue.[[37]](#footnote-37) He divides the history of the use of the holy tongue into two periods. During the first period, all the nations spoke the holy tongue; this continued to be the case until the Tower of Babylon. During the second period, following this generation, only Abraham continued to speak the holy tongue. Yet even he used it only for sacred matters, while “it appears that in his home he, too, spoke Aramaic.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The Sanz-Klausenberger Admor, meanwhile, explains that due to Hebrew’s sacred character, people must meet certain stringent preconditions before they can speak it. These conditions relate to the content of what is being spoken, the place where it is being used, and the person using it. He rules that Hebrew must not be used for secular matters, and certainly not for “improper” subjects, such as gossip, humor, and levity, since these are even worse than speaking the language in the bathhouse or the toilet.[[39]](#footnote-39) It is, of course, improper to utter indecent words in any language; however, in the spirit of Maimonides’ injunction,[[40]](#footnote-40) it is particularly reprehensible to do so in the holy tongue.[[41]](#footnote-41) The Admor explains that the Sages’ promise that those who speak in the holy tongue will be assured of their place in the World to Come (Jerusalem Talmud, *Shekalim* 47, col. 3) refers only to those who are fit to speak in this tongue and meet the strict preconditions for this purpose. Moreover, the use of Hebrew speech obliges the speaker to behave in a holy and pure manner and reminds him to be pure in what he eats. The practical ramification of this, therefore, is that “someone who is certain of his ability to act in a holy and pure manner may speak in the holy tongue, but persons such as ourselves should not be overly clever and change a practice transmitted from generation to generation.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Only exceptionally meretricious individuals (such as the Vilna Gaon) spoke in the holy tongue. “Others, including even the Ba’al Shem Tov and his holy followers, in their great modesty did not have the audacity to speak in Hebrew.”[[43]](#footnote-43) How much more so, then, “the common man who uses this language is akin to a person using the scepter of the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

The Satmar and Sanz-Klausenberger Admorim also imposed strict conditions regarding the locations in which Hebrew may be spoken. Although the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayim* 85b) permits Hebrew speech even in filthy places, Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (known as the “Magen Avraham”) wrote that it is an act of piety to refrain from doing so, while the Rabbi Moses Sofer (the “Hatam Sofer”) went a step further, extending this rule to places of idol worship and filth.[[45]](#footnote-45) The two Admorim adopted the interpretation of the Hatam Sofer, which they then use to explain various historical events. For example, they explain that the Jews of Babylonian refrained from speaking the holy tongue due to the prevalence of idol worship in that land: “our forefathers led their sons without using the holy tongue, and we forgot this completely in our great sins, since they were exiled to Babylon which was full of idols.”[[46]](#footnote-46) In other words, the fact that the Jewish people forgot its language during the seventy year-long exile in Babylon, to the point that they required interpreters during the reading of the Torah (as described in chapter eight of Nehemiah) was not due to cultural assimilation, as the verses superficially imply, but to a proactive order not to use the holy tongue in a place of idol worship due to the sanctity of this language and the reluctance to defile it.

The Sanz-Klausenberger Admor claims that we have forgotten the original holy tongue.[[47]](#footnote-47) Speaking in a corrupted version of the holy tongue is the worst possible option and should be avoided. It is true that the prayers and blessings recited in Hebrew are also marred by this same flaw, but “we have no other option but to say them as best we can; in mundane speech; however, it is preferable to use another language rather than speak the corrupted Hebrew in our possession.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Knowledge of the original and uncorrupted holy tongue will return in the future, as described in the Book of Zephaniah (3:9): “For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language” (i.e. the holy tongue) “so that then the earth shall be filled with knowledge and holiness and each man will acquire the holy tongue by himself.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

These arguments center on the claim that the sanctity of the Hebrew language elevates it to such a level that its use in speech becomes a virtually unattainable ideal. Any attempt to turn Hebrew into a spoken language effectively damages the very essence of the language. Thus the two Admorim share the opinion that the use of the holy tongue in speech is a “law that will apply when the Messiah comes.”[[50]](#footnote-50) The dual character of a holy tongue that evokes both affinity and discomfort is reminiscent in many ways of the dual character of the Land of Israel as the “land of delight and anxiety,” to use a term coined by Aviezer Ravitzky.[[51]](#footnote-51)

In addition to the explanation that the sacred character of Hebrew means that it should not be used in speech, the Admorim also raise a complementary argument emphasizing the strength of the holy tongue and the inherent danger in its improper use by unworthy individuals. While the former danger is essentially spiritual and educational, the latter has a magic character.

Here, too, the Admorim present a comprehensive theory regarding the strength of the Hebrew language. The holy tongue has an ontological status that has existed before the world was created (since the Torah was written in Hebrew, and the Torah pre-existed Creation). Moreover, Hebrew was the language used to create the world.[[52]](#footnote-52) This perception has its origins in talmudic literature,[[53]](#footnote-53) but it was particularly emphasized and developed in the Zohar.[[54]](#footnote-54) The ramifications of this status include an ability to influence reality for better or for worse. The tzaddikim – the spiritual masters of Hasidism – can perform positive miracles through the use of Hebrew, while the wicked are liable to cause disasters and enable the Sitra Ahra (the evil “Other Side”) to gain a foothold in the world, as happened in the Generation of the Dispersion.[[55]](#footnote-55)

For the Admor of Satmar, the building of the Tower of Babel and the punishment of the Generation of Dispersion acquire the status of a formative story concerning the strength of the holy tongue. He follows the Zohar in explaining that those who built the Tower of Babel sought to empower the force of evil, the *Sitra Ahra*, in the world. They did so by using the tool used to create and maintain the world – the holy tongue. He explains that it is no coincidence that the Torah states that it was God who “confused the tongues” of those engaged in building the tower. The other punishments they endured (according to the Midrash) are not mentioned in the Bible, since “everything depended on this miracle that the holy tongue was taken from them; indeed, for as long as they spoke in the holy tongue, then miracles actually occurred to encourage their success.”[[56]](#footnote-56) The Generation of Dispersion thus succeeded in instigate a worldwide rebellion against God, thanks solely to the fact that they spoke in the holy tongue. As long as God did not corrupt their tongue, not even God Himself could “deter them from their evil and from the success of their rebellion.” Thus the holy language is capable of changing reality, even contrary to God’s wishes. Accordingly, it was first necessary to corrupt their language, removing the strength and might to rebel against God and to influence reality for the worse: “For the worst disaster in the world comes when the evil ones speak the holy tongue.” In our days, too, “Samael (Satan) and his minions know how much of the holy tongue to leave in their speech, in such manner that they have a grip over the forces of impurity as in the Generation of the Dispersion, and even more than them.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

The Admor Aharon Roth (1894–1947) wrote even more explicitly about the connection between Hebrew speech and contemporary woes. In his book *Shomer Emunim*, which was published during the Second World War, he makes an impassioned plea to resist the the revivers of the Hebrew language: “Most of the troubles and the woes emerged because spoiled and defiled our holy and awful tongue – for all the worlds are built with this tongue.” Roth adds: “And know this, my friends and brothers – my soul fears what might become of this, Heaven forbid, for the enemies of Israel.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

A similar approach was adopted by Rabbi Menashe Klein (1925–2011), the rabbi of the Ungvar community in New York, who was on close terms with the Sanz-Klausenberger Admor.[[59]](#footnote-59) Klein followed the approach of *Sefer Yetzirah*,[[60]](#footnote-60) emphasizing a connection between the Covenant of Circumcision (representing the prohibition against the spilling of seed, and more generally all sexual offenses) and the Covenant of the Tongue, and discussing the affinities and mutual influences between these two realms. Those who maintain the former covenant in purity may also maintain the purity of their tongue, “but when, Heaven forbid, the Covenant of the Circumcision is impaired, which is directed against the Covenant of the Tongue, then language is impaired and the individual can no longer properly pronounce the holy letters.”[[61]](#footnote-61) The sharp dissonance between speech in the inherently sacred holy tongue and the impairment of the Covenant of the Circumcision or prohibited speech damages the entire world. Speech in other languages can also have a harmful impact, but not to the same extent or with the same force as in the case of the holy tongue. Basing himself on Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (“the Shalah,”) Klein goes on to suggest that the vitality of any language is due to its inclusion of words that originated in the holy tongue: “There is not one of the seventy nations whose language has not adopted some words from the holy tongue (for this maintains the vitality of every nation.”) The more words from the holy tongue in any particular language, the greater its power to act in the world. This power can be directed for good purposes or bad. Although Modern Hebrew is not the holy tongue, it includes numerous words from the holy tongue, and this, in Klein’s opinion, empowers it with an extremely dangerous potential.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Alongside their focus on the influence exerted by language on the world, the Admorim also address its allegedly harmful influence on the individual. The Admor of Satmar presents the principled argument that the use of the holy tongue is liable to corrupt those who use it. It might be thought that this argument had already been raised during the first stage of opposition to Hebrew, and indeed constituted one of the main pillars of this opposition. However, the Admor of Satmar now grants an a-historical dimension to this argument. In the earlier stage, opponents of Hebrew had accused the Zionist revolution of usurping Hebrew in order to change Jewish identity. Now, however, the Admor seeks to prove that the Sages envisioned the potential abuse of the holy tongue and sought forestall it. The contemporary phenomenon of the revival of Modern Hebrew is merely one of many historical examples which highlight the negative impact the holy tongue can have on those who speak it.

Thus the origins of the prohibition against Hebrew lies not in modern times, i.e. in Zionism, but rather in the wisdom of the Sages, who anticipated what was to come and emphasized the damage that could be caused by study of the holy tongue. According to Klein, this explains why, despite the importance and usefulness of a knowledge of the holy tongue, the Babylonian Talmud does not require fathers to teach their sons in this language, since “one should not perform a commandment by means of something that might lead to a flaw – all the more so since they feared the decline of the generations and reprehensibly opinions, Heaven forbid, which are the worst of all.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

According to Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (“Yoelish,”) concern at the negative influence of the holy tongue is accentuated in the case of women: “The obstacle is greater in their case when they are taught this language, and when the venom and impurity of Zionism and the poison of apostasy are cast around them. For the force of apostasy is entrenched among them, and they then proceed to marry Torah scholars, destroying entire homes among the Jewish people.” Accordingly, he determines that “every man must protest against this in his home and prevent his daughters from learning the Hebrew language, which is apostasy and heresy.”[[64]](#footnote-64) The Admor of Satmar also draws parallels between the obligation to learn the holy tongue and the permissibility teaching women Torah. He adopts a forceful position prohibiting Torah study for women, due to their levity, and accordingly he rules that women must not be taught the holy tongue. He quotes two reasons for this: firstly, that study of the holy tongue constitutes a tool for Torah study, and accordingly is irrelevant for women; and secondly, that the holy tongue would provide women with tools for the independent study of the Torah and its commentators, thereby drawing them to sin, since they are prohibited to engage in Torah study.[[65]](#footnote-65) This latter argument is reminiscent of a broader argument regarding the access that a knowledge of Hebrew provides to prohibited and improper texts. However, while the earlier arguments concerned heretical works and “false opinions,” we now find that the Torah itself is the forbidden text!

The Sanz-Klausenberger Rebbe also seeks to show that the fear of the harm caused by Hebrew is an ancient concern that predates the emergence of Modern Hebrew. However, he refers to a completely different prohibition: “Neither shall ye walk in their statutes” (Leviticus 18:3). He applies this to the use of the local language, including Hebrew.[[66]](#footnote-66) It hardly needs to be noted that it is difficult to see how the use of the local spoken language can be included under the category of “their statutes,” which in halakhic terms has been interpreted as referring to matters of ritual and magic.[[67]](#footnote-67) He also argues that the prohibition against speaking Hebrew applies particularly to women. In this context, he refers to a common practice in Germany (Ashkenaz) that a menstruating woman[[68]](#footnote-68) may not defile the temple – i.e. may not enter the synagogue, pray, mention God’s name, or touch a Torah scroll. He extends this prohibition to the holy tongue: “It may be that for reasons of piety and sanctity, women should also be careful not to speak the holy tongue during their ‘days of seeing’ [menstruation] and this is why they required another Jewish language apart from the holy tongue.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Thus the argument is not only that women are prohibited from speaking the holy tongue during their ‘days of seeing,’ but that this is the reason why Yiddish was invented in the first place! The Sanz-Klausenberger Admor interprets the injunctions introduced by Rabbi Yossi in Sepphoris. According to the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Sanhedrin), Rabbi Yossi ruled that a woman should not go alone to the toilet, but together with another woman, to prevent her finding herself alone with another man (or to prevent rape).[[70]](#footnote-70) Since the toilet in those days was in a field outside the city,[[71]](#footnote-71) he ruled that women should talk to each other while one of them was at her toilet, so that others would be able to hear that she was not alone. However, the Sanz-Klausenberger Rebbe recalls that speech in the holy tongue in filthy places defiles the sanctity of the language. Accordingly, he concludes that the women of the time must have spoken in some type of private language. “The women must have a special language for this purpose. And we can also see that most of the women’s names are terms from foreign languages.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

Thus the remarks by the two Admorim show that if men should refrain from using the holy tongue as a spoken language, women should all the more so do so – and not only by way of a spoken language, but to a large extent even as a ritual one, since much of the ritual use of Hebrew is in the context of the study of Torah, which is prohibited for women.[[73]](#footnote-73) In order to perform the ritual actions that involve the use of language, such as prayers or reading texts such as the *Tzena Urena*, women do not necessarily need to understand the context of the text – it is sufficient that they read it in a ritual manner.[[74]](#footnote-74)

**The Argument of the Separation of Languages**

The argument of the separation of languages claims that Modern Hebrew and the holy tongue are two distinct languages that must be discussed separately. This argument contradicts basic intuition, since for all its innovations, Modern Hebrew is usually perceived as a linguistic layer of an ancient language, rather than a language created *ex nihilo*. As we will see, however, this argument is not spurious and its advocates are able to offer rationales for it.

How does one distinguish between two different languages as opposed to two dialects of the same language? This is a broad question, and one that lies beyond the purview of this article. Theoretical linguistics has examined this problem, and it has often been suggested that the distinction between a language and a dialect is a political one. As the linguist Uriel Weinrich famously remarked: “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”[[75]](#footnote-75) The influential theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky shares this view.[[76]](#footnote-76) This question also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the relationship between the different historical layers of the same language: here, too, we may ask what constitutes an internal development within a single language, and as opposed to the birth of a new one. Less attention has been given to this question, since languages usually enjoy clear historical contiguity. In the special instance of Hebrew, however, when there was certainly artificial and proactive intervention with the goal of creating a new layer, the question is particularly daunting. Most linguists seem to agree that Modern Hebrew indeed constitutes a later stratum of ancient Hebrew, just as talmudic and rabbinic Hebrew constitute distinct phases of a single language, despite their considerable differences. Accordingly, when discussing the connection between the holy tongue and Hebrew, the more intuitive argument is that the two enjoy historical contiguity and thus do not constitute two separate languages.

Moreover, we can see that most of the speakers during the first stage of the struggle against Hebrew did not challenge the assumption that a single language was involved. Indeed, Zionism adopted the holy tongue with the motivation of maintaining the historical contiguity of the Jewish people through language. In the second stage of the struggle, however, both the mainstream and the conservative wing of Haredi Judaism came to rely on the claim of the separation of languages, though this led them to opposite conclusions. For the Haredi mainstream, this conclusion served as a justification for the permission to speak Modern Hebrew, setting aside the issue entirely. For the conservative wing, however, the same argument led to the opposite conclusion: although the two languages are distinct, it is forbidden to speak either in the holy tongue or in Modern Hebrew.

We can in fact find the argument that the languages are separate as early as the 1920s, toward the end of the first stage of the struggle. It was raised mainly by members of the Hungarian and Galician Hasidic dynasties, such as Rabbi Shaul Brach (1965–1940), the rabbi of Kasho;[[77]](#footnote-77) Rabbi Yaakov Yechezkiyahu Greenwald of Puppa (1882–1941);[[78]](#footnote-78) and the Admorim Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam of Bobov (1874-1941)[[79]](#footnote-79) and Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn of Lubavitch (“the Rayatz,” 1880–1950).[[80]](#footnote-80) However, this position only attained a broad consensus during the second stage of the struggle. Those who examined this question in a broad and systematic manner include Rabbi Avraham Wolf (1911–1979)[[81]](#footnote-81) and the two Admorim we have already discussed at length: Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum of Satmar[[82]](#footnote-82) and Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam of Sanz-Klausenberg.[[83]](#footnote-83)

What, then, were the grounds presented by those Haredim who claimed that the two languages are separate? Various rationales may be offered but two are particularly prominent.[[84]](#footnote-84) The first is that the identity of the holy tongue is determined by a **value-based and teleological test** whose roots lies in the writings of Maimonides[[85]](#footnote-85) and Nachmanides.[[86]](#footnote-86) Maimonides averred that the unique quality of the holy tongue is the fact that it is a “clean language,” while Nachmanides suggested that its uniqueness lies in the fact that it is the language with which God spoke to the prophets. Modern Hebrew meets neither of these criteria, and accordingly it may be concluded that it constitutes a language in its own right, and not the holy tongue.[[87]](#footnote-87) However, the more dominant justification offered for the distinction between the holy tongue and Hebrew is the **objective test** regarding vocabulary. According to this test, we are to examine the vocabulary of the two languages and assess whether what they have in common is greater than what divides them, or vice versa. According to those who advocate such a test, its application to the holy tongue and to Hebrew shows that these are two separate languages. The first implicit expressions of this position can already be seen during the first stage of the debate,[[88]](#footnote-88) but it was elaborated into a structured theory by Rabbi Yosef Avraham Wolf, the influential head of the Beis Yaakov seminary in Bnei Brak and one of the most prominent spokesmen during this stage of struggle. Rabbi Wolf, who was also an active columnist, begins by emphasizing that the distinction between the holy tongue and Hebrew is not one of pronunciation or accent:[[89]](#footnote-89) “The difference between the holy tongue and Hebrew relates to the vocabulary of Modern Hebrew: the holy tongue; Aramaic; words whose roots lie in the holy tongue but whose form has been changed; foreign and international words; and arbitrary words, some of which were drawn from the holy tongue but removed from their original meaning. Now we can see that only one of these five components is actually the holy tongue.”[[90]](#footnote-90) After giving examples of the various components, he concludes: “This language (Modern Hebrew) includes foundations of the holy tongue, among other components, but this part does not determine the whole.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

Rabbi Wolf notes that Modern Hebrew is not “an improper language, but a profane language.”[[92]](#footnote-92) He is aware of the problematic nature of the use of Hebrew in speech, due to its similarity to the holy tongue, but he explains the need to use this language in everyday life, relying for this purpose on “the Hazon Ish and the other great men of the generation” who “refrained from turning the language into a problem.”[[93]](#footnote-93)

It is indeed true that the “Hazon Ish” (Rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz, 1878–1953) maintained that it was pointless to fight against the Hebrew language since the outcome of the struggle had already been determined; efforts should instead focus on contemporary threats to Haredim. He likened the present-day struggle against the Hebrew language to an old battlefield that has already been abandoned by the enemy forces. When a new war breaks out, a veteran general insists on positioning his troops in the historical battleground, despite the fact that there are now newer and more dangerous weak points. The Hazon Ish concludes: “The lesson is – this is not the battlefront now.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Accordingly, he focuses the discussion on the pragmatic question as to whether it is wise to struggle against Hebrew, rather than on theological or ideological questions. Since his answer to this question is negative, he does not need to enter into the debate about whether it is permitted or prohibited to speak in this language, or whether it constitutes some type of threat.

However, although Rabbi Wolf develops the argument of the separation of languages, he also seeks to warn of the inherent danger of Modern Hebrew, in the hope of limiting the damage it causes. He notes that the use of words from the holy tongue is dangerous and problematic. People should be aware of this, and sometimes even avoid such use. He gives numerous examples to support his claim.[[95]](#footnote-95) By way of example, the word *aggadah* is used in the holy tongue to refer to certain sections of the Oral Torah, whereas in Modern Hebrew the word acquired the meaning of a children’s fairytale—something imaginary and untrue. Rabbi Wolf argues that this constitutes sacrilege, and accordingly people should avoid using this word in its Modern Hebrew sense.[[96]](#footnote-96) The same applies to the words *mishkan* and *knesset*, which refer to the temporary temple of the Children of Israel and to the “Men of the Great Assembly.” Thus, Wolf concludes that “even if it is not possible to avoid using this concept as people are now accustomed, one should nevertheless express reservations.”[[97]](#footnote-97) The nephew of the Hazon Ish, Rabbi Chaim Shaul Karelitz (1912–2001), was more forceful in his warnings against the influence of words on the practical domain and on the inherent risks involved in the use of “distorted words” in Modern Hebrew. Thus, for example, he suggests that if people had continued to refer to the (secular) courts in the country by means of the term *arka’ot* (which is used in the rabbinical literature to refer to Gentile courts), then “Jews faithful to God’s Torah might not, to our shame and disgrace, turn to these courts to litigate of their own free will, as happens often, for our great sins.”[[98]](#footnote-98) Accordingly, he urges those Haredim that use Modern Hebrew to be careful to avoid the use of such distorted words: “We bear an obligation to reinforce our independence and our spiritual liberty and to place guards lest they break through our wall, and to turn every kosher Jewish home into a protective fortress that will not permit the corruption of the terms used in their books and newspapers.”[[99]](#footnote-99) The supplement of the Haredi newspaper *Yated Ne’eman* published a column entitled “Mishpat,” focusing each week on an expression in spoken Hebrew and analyzing its proper meaning in correct Hebrew. Many years later, in 2008, a booklet entitled *Safa Berura* was written by Ephraim Kahane, the writer of the above-mentioned column.[[100]](#footnote-100)

In the introduction to his book, Kahane explains that “spoken Hebrew (hereinafter SH…)[[101]](#footnote-101) not only does not help its speakers to understand the Holy Writings properly, but actually serves as an obstacle to such understanding!”[[102]](#footnote-102) He relates that when he tested “two yeshiva students from the United States, who speak English and Yiddish only, and two students from the Holy Land who attend the holy yeshivas,” he was not surprised to discover that “the speakers of SM were incorrect regarding the precise meaning of the world, while those who live abroad indeed interpreted it correctly!”[[103]](#footnote-103) The author collected some 1,200 words, clarified their meaning in Modern Hebrew, and compared them to their original meaning in the holy tongue. Each word is accompanied by the incorrect meaning attributed to it in Modern Hebrew and it original (“correct”) meaning in the holy tongue. The author also quotes the source indicating the proper meaning of the word. Kahane divides the distortions of these words into various categories: completely erroneous meanings; erroneously expanded meanings; meanings narrowed without justification; close but imprecise meanings; and words invented in Modern Hebrew. He also provides lists of words of foreign origin, words of Aramaic origin, and additional categories.[[104]](#footnote-104) Similar discussions of the connection between the holy language and Hebrew can be found on the websites of both Israeli and American Haredim.[[105]](#footnote-105) In most cases, Yiddish speakers distinguish between the holy tongue and Modern Hebrew in practical terms by pronouncing them differently: the “holy tongue” is always pronounced in the Ashkenazi manner, while Modern Hebrew is spoken using the standard Israeli accent.[[106]](#footnote-106)

This distinction between the holy tongue and Modern Hebrew secures two objectives simultaneously: it expresses reticence regarding Modern Hebrew, while at the same time enabling its recognition as a spoken language in everyday life, thereby reflecting the reality that has emerged among large sections of the Haredi public. This approach of adopting a particular pattern of behavior while at the same time expressing reservations about it is one of the hallmarks of the Haredi mainstream, and is reflected in many respects in additional fields other than the Hebrew language. For example, while the conservative wing has adopted an approach of alienation from the Zionist institutions and maintains its refusal to recognize the State of Israel, the mainstream – represented in the political arena by Agudat Yisrael – has taken a more pragmatic approach. Its position is that the Haredi community should not refrain from practical cooperation with the authorities when this can advance its interests, but conversely should not assume responsibility through involvement as government ministers. The underlying conceptual approach is the same in both instances: compromises can be reached with reality on the pragmatic level, when necessary, but these will not receive a positive and value-based seal of approval, particularly on the symbolic level. Accordingly, while among general society in Israel – both secular and national-religious – there is a clear sense of pride and satisfaction in the revival of the Hebrew language after two thousand years of exile, the moderate Haredi mainstream in no sense shares this sentiment. While many in the mainstream, and particularly in the Litvak sector, use Hebrew fully in the street, the media, schools, and yeshivot, a sense of reservation is still evident on the symbolic level.

**The Ramifications of the Change: The Veneration of Yiddish**

The position adopted by the conservative Haredi circles encountered a difficulty: if the prohibition against speaking the holy tongue applies only to the “true” tongue (Biblical Hebrew), and if Modern Hebrew does not constitute a holy tongue, then why should it not be used as a spoken language, as is indeed the case in the Haredi mainstream? However, this difficulty leads not to the granting of a “permit” to speak Modern Hebrew, but rather to the strengthening of the prohibition against this language. The argument of the conservative Haredi wing is that the linguistic proximity between Modern Hebrew and the holy tongue does not draw the former closer to the status of a “kosher” language; on the contrary, it places it on such an inferior level that its use is forbidden. This argument may seem reminiscent of Maimonides’ ruling that it is more reprehensible to speak distastefully in the holy tongue than in another language.[[107]](#footnote-107) In reality, however, the logic here is different. While Maimonides negates distasteful speech in a language he recognizes as the holy tongue, the conservative Haredi wing insists that the holy tongue and Modern Hebrew are two distinct languages, albeit ones that share a linguistic proximity. The essential impropriety of Modern Hebrew is that is distorts and corrupts the original meaning of the words, thereby defiling the language and hence becoming more reprehensible than any other language.

The analogy used is that between Modern Hebrew and Aramaic. An ambivalent attitude can be seen toward Aramaic. On the one hand, it enjoys a dignified status as a language that is considered to have been given at Mt. Sinai through the holy spirit.[[108]](#footnote-108) On the other, the Talmud notes in several places that “a person must never make his supplications in Aramaic,” since the angels do not recognize this language. The Admor of Satmar quotes remarks by Rabbi Asher Ben Yechiel (“the Rosh”) implying that if the angels know what is inside a human’s heart, then they surely also know Aramaic; however, “they consider it reprehensible to make use thereof.” Why should they find this reprehensible? Following the exegesis of the author of *Ma’adanei Yom Tov*, the Admor explains that the reason is that Aramaic “is close to the holy tongue, and so they find it reprehensible, as it is akin to a language that has been corrupted.” He then argues that the same logic applies even more clearly to Modern Hebrew:

And if I state that Aramaic is imbued with the holy spirit and from Sinai, and in any case that it includes the holy tongue with changes, then it goes without saying that when apostates and heretics add various strange admixtures into the holy tongue, this is contemptible and deplorable, and is to be called utterly impure, and is thousands and tens of thousands time worse than the other languages of the nations that the Holy One, blessed be He, made through the attending angels.[[109]](#footnote-109)

It is almost as though the Admor of Satmar took the criticisms leveled at Yiddish by the *Maskilim*, who referred to it pejoratively as a “jargon,” and applied them to Modern Hebrew, belittling it as a synthetic, artificial, and corrupted language – and hence also as an improper one.

Accordingly, we might assume that the instruction would be that it is prohibited to speak in Modern Hebrew, and that the Haredim should instead adopt other foreign languages as their language of speech. However, the Sages established that Jews should not speak the Gentile languages.[[110]](#footnote-110) Accordingly, the instruction is that not only Modern Hebrew is an improper vehicle for speech, but so are all the other foreign languages. This situation leads to an almost absurd situation: speech in the holy tongue is prohibited due to its sanctity, while speech in foreign languages is prohibited due to their impurity. What language, then, is fit for use in speech? As we will see, the proposed solution is to use the languages invented by the Jews in their countries of residence: Yiddish in the Ashkenazi world and Ladino in the Sephardi communities.

The edict against speaking Gentile languages appears in the Jerusalem Talmud as part of an ancient decision known as the “Eighteen Edicts” intended to prevent intimacy between Jews and Gentiles.[[111]](#footnote-111) In similar spirit, the Midrash approvingly notes that the Children of Israel in Egypt did not abandon their language and speak in the local tongue.[[112]](#footnote-112) However, it was the Hatam Sofer who translated this value into a slogan, declaring in his testament: “Beware of changing the name, language, and dress of the Jews, and the acronym for this is – ‘let Jacob come complete.’”[[113]](#footnote-113) Hungarian Orthodoxy followed this approach, insisting that sermons in the synagogue must continue to be given in Yiddish, rather than in the national language as adopted by the Neolog movement. However, they later abandoned this position with the consent of the Keter Sofer, the grandson of the Hatam Sofer.[[114]](#footnote-114) Even after this retreat, however, conservative Haredi circles continued to venerate Yiddish and to insist that the edict against speaking Gentile languages continues to apply in modern times. They found support for their position in some rather tangential remarks included by the Hatam Sofer in one of his Halakhic responsa.[[115]](#footnote-115)

Since, as we have seen, the Haredi approach defines Modern Hebrew as a language in its own right, and not as part of the holy tongue, it is accordingly considered analogous to any other foreign language (and indeed as worse than these languages, as we saw above). Accordingly, it should not be used in speech. Accordingly, the only language of speech that remains available is the language invented by the Jews in their place of residence: Yiddish in the Ashkenazi world and Ladino in the Sephardi communities.[[116]](#footnote-116) Those who adhere to this position suggest that the emergence of Yiddish and Ladino was the product not of historical circumstances, but of divine intervention. Rabbi Aharon Roth, the Shomer Emunim, lauds Yiddish and Ladino, asserting that these languages came into the world as the result of Divine Providence. He also implies that this process influenced heavenly beings: “For by so doing, they subdue a few of the divine hosts, and were it not for this – who knows whether any remnant of us would remain, Heaven forbid, for our many sins; and this is sufficient for the wise.” In other words, the Shomer Emunim implies that not only does the holy tongue represents spiritual forces, but so do the Gentile languages. However, while the former language represents the forces of sanctity, the latter embody the forces of impurity. The fact that the Jews used the languages of the nations, while imbuing them with many words from the holy tongue, meant that they could thereby overcome the impure force of the nations of the world, and hence avert a greater disaster.[[117]](#footnote-117)

Accordingly, Yiddish enjoys a particular advantage, insofar as it is neither the holy tongue, which is prohibited as a spoken language, nor a completely foreign language, since it was created by Jews. This honorable status is awarded not only to Yiddish, but to all the “Jewish languages:”

And this is why it is not mentioned in the verses that they should study the holy tongue even in the Land of Israel,[[118]](#footnote-118) for they corrupted the Arabic and Spanish languages, and in almost all the places where the Jews lived, they corrupted their language, as is well known, and made of it a Jewish language in order to observe the commandment “neither shall ye walk in their statues.” And the reference here is to speech for mundane needs.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Thus Yiddish, alongside the other languages of the Diaspora invented by the Jews, comes to constitute the sole solution for the Jew who wishes to adhere to “kosher” speech – without desecrating the holy tongue and without employing the Gentile languages. In his testament, the Sanz-Klausenberger Admor elevates this approach to the level of a clear and explicit order:

I must warn and command, Heaven forbid, against (Jews) speaking the foreign languages; they should raise their sons, with God’s help, in the speech to which our holy forefathers were accustomed, in Yiddish, as I have already explained at length in sermons and responsa, and they should not, Heaven forbid, change to the English language nor to the Hebrew language, and they should be very careful in speaking in the home and with their male and female fellows solely in Yiddish.[[120]](#footnote-120)

Before these figures, the Admor Rabbi Chaim Elazar of Munkacs (1871–1931) argued as early as the 1930s that the fact that Yiddish had become part of the customs of “our fathers and rabbis” granted it an element of sanctity. In his book *Divrei Torah*, Elazar writes that the obligation to adhere to the ways of the pious includes the obligation to adhere to “the Jewish language, jargon, as spoken and practiced by our holy fellow Jews, even though it is a profane language, for the merit of our fathers and rabbis will protect us, and in their devotion and uniqueness in every aspect of speech they set it within the confines of sanctity.”[[121]](#footnote-121) According to this approach, the use of Yiddish for speech is not merely a permissible solution, but almost approaches the level of a positive commandment.

**Conclusion and Analysis**

In his famous work *The Shabbes Goy*, Jacob Katz coined the phrase “ritual instinct.”[[122]](#footnote-122) This term refers to the covert element of consciousness through which the public determines that a given action is acceptable or unacceptable, and accordingly acts as if this were a matter of religious law. This instinct is not the product of the religious sources, but seems to emerge as the result of the internalization of certain religious values during the process of the education and socialization of the halakhically-observant Jew. It becomes a significant normative factor when observant Jews act as if this instinct establishes prohibitions and permissions. At a certain stage, however, this instinct and this living behavior will be required to stand before religious sources and acquire a formal halakhic manifestation. They ostensibly become a halakhic position that is raised by those who shape the Halakhah and determined to be correct or erroneous. In this stage, the ritual instinct receives the rabbis’ stamp of approval or finds itself in conflict with their instructions. In either case, it henceforth ceases to constitute a mere common practice, and begins to become part of “higher” and orderly halakhic discourse.

Katz explains that this “ritual instinct” exists mainly among the general and ordinary pubic; rabbis, Torah scholars, and the religious and social leadership only enter the picture in the later stage. However, it is appropriate to ask here whether the religious elite might not also possess a “ritual instinct.” Does the Halakhah not conduct itself in their case, too, by way of a consciousness, conduct or undefined awareness, before it acquires its Halakhic and textual garb? In the works of certain Halakhic authorities, we find explicit references to just this type of instinct, which they sometimes attribute to divine enlightenment or a form of the holy spirit.[[123]](#footnote-123) However, such phenomena relate to their activities as Halakhic arbiters, in most cases as they issue responsa to questions posed to them. The real question here is to what extent rabbis, Admorim, educators, and other religious leaders are aware of the phenomena in their surroundings, before these have acquired the form of a halakhic question. The question of the Haredi attitude toward the Hebrew language would appear to offer an interesting test case for examining this phenomenon.

Our discussion above established two yardsticks for gauging the Haredi attitude toward Hebrew: the question of the affinity (or lack thereof) between Modern Hebrew and the holy tongue; and the question of the legitimacy of adopting Modern Hebrew as a spoken language. In both cases, we found that changes have occurred in the Haredi attitude toward modern Hebrew. These are reflected in two main stages. In the first stage, Hebrew was regarded as the successor of the Biblical “holy tongue.” However, conservative Haredim expressed reservations about the language due to its desecration by the Zionists and their use of Hebrew as a weapon, though without entering into a thorough Halakhic discussion. In the second stage, most Haredim, particularly from the mainstream, adopted the argument that Modern Hebrew constitutes a new language, alien to the “holy tongue.” However, they were divided in their normative conclusion. Conservative circles prohibited use of Hebrew and venerated Yiddish, while mainstream circles permitted the use of Hebrew. A further distinction must be made between most of the Hasidic dynasties, which continued to adhere to Yiddish despite the “permit” to use Hebrew, and the Litvaks (as well as the Gur Hasidim, during the first few decades following Israel’s independence), which adopted Hebrew as a spoken language for all purposes. In this stage, the conservative circles used the argument of the alienation of Modern Hebrew from the holy tongue as grounds for prohibiting its use, while the Litvaks employed this same argument to permit such use. Nevertheless, even the Litvaks sought to nurture as negative attitude toward Modern Hebrew, though they did so mainly by educational means, including warnings against the incorrect use of problematic words that had been secularized by Ben Yehuda and his followers. Be this as it may, the evident to need to “recap” the reservations about Modern Hebrew in various treatises and media (reservations that, in most cases, are themselves written in Modern Hebrew…) testifies, on the one hand, to the success of the Zionist project in penetrating even the Haredi world, but, on the other, to the possibility that this struggle has still not been completely determined, at least in the eyes of those who pursue it.

However, it is also worth examining the nature of the developments in the Haredi world in more theoretical terms. This will enhance our understanding of the process that occurred in terms of the quality of religious normativity, in general, and of the Halakhah, in particular.

In the first stage, when those engaged in the debate did not engage in detailed Halakhic discourse, the prohibition (or, more precisely, the reservation) regarding the use of Modern Hebrew as a spoken language was based on ideological and educational values.[[124]](#footnote-124) The test case of the Haredi struggle against Hebrew may have something to teach us regarding the process of “Halakhization” of a norm, or at least regarding the attempt to pursue such a course – an attempt that was not completely successful.

The individuals involved in the first stage of the Haredi struggle sometimes adopted the terminology of prohibition and presented this prohibition as a “fence” against religious deterioration. However, the categories of “prohibition” and “fence” both belong to Halakhic discourse. In this case, though, the “Halakhah” did not emerge from the textual sources, but from reactions based on other sources of religious consciousness. It did not always confine itself to formulations constituting a mere recommendation, but neither did it seek to anchor itself in the writings of the Sages and the Halakhic arbiters. It presented grounds, generally of one particular kind (educational and ideological), nut it refrained from making systemic distinctions that require a relatively sophisticated argument, such as the distinction between the holy tongue and Modern Hebrew. This prohibition was essentially based on a form of “ritual instinct,” or “Torah opinion.” Unlike the classic “Torah opinion,” however, it was promulgated not by the senior Torah sages of the day. Rather, it emerged from the grassroots by way of an immediate and defensive reaction. Moreover, it is often apparent that the opponents were not entirely convinced by their own position and continued to experience a sense of discomfort due to the dissonance between their awareness of the “damages” of Hebrew and their awareness of its sacred status.

The developments during the next stage of the struggle show that the Haredi consciousness was unable to continue to pursue the struggle along these lines. Instead, it sought to position the struggle in a new, a-historical context with a more strongly normative dimension. This was the second stage of the struggle. A clear effort is now made to offer a systemic and quasi-legal analysis of the status of Hebrew, even if this is sometimes based not on Halakhic sources but on Aggadic, sermonizing, or ideological ones. This change may also reflect the changing circumstances: as Hebrew became entrenched, its use became less of a charged issue imbued with symbolic importance. Hebrew speakers were not necessarily considered to be identifying thereby with the values of Zionism and secularization; rather, they considered Hebrew to be a convenient and “natural” language. Accordingly, a need emerged to anchor the prohibition in a clear determination with orderly grounds. As we saw above, the arguments that emerged against the use of the holy tongue as a spoken language have a principled and substantive character, reflecting the dangers that this use can allegedly cause, without reference to its actual adoption by the Zionists and the Jewish state. It should be noted that during the second stage of the discourse against Modern Hebrew, we do not find any denial of the educational and ideological arguments raised during the first stage. The conservative wing of Haredi Judaism, in particular, continues to adopt these arguments passionately. However, the “new” arguments, with their more Halakhic and systemic character, are presented as a more basic and fundamental “ground floor” providing the foundation for the educational and ideological arguments.

The process of “Halakhization” of opposition to the Hebrew language appears to have acquired a systemic and comprehensive character, at least on the conservative wing of Haredi Judaism. Representatives of this wing quote sources in support of their arguments (however convincing or otherwise we may find their exegetical endeavors). They develop a systemic line of argument, engage in detailed discussion of objections and excuses (even if the outcome of their discussion is known in advance), and they produce new distinctions. The ultimate conclusion – in this case, the rejection of Hebrew – no longer has the appearance of being the product of “ritual instinct” responding to a given historical phenomenon, but instead acquires the character of an instruction that has been developed from its ancient sources, and even enjoys an a-historical status.

The underlying purpose of the objection to Hebrew and the desire to adopt Yiddish as a spoken language would appear to be to maintain the separation of the members of the community and to prevent negative influences on its members. The attempt to undertake the pseudo-“Halakhization” of this opposition constitutes a means of control that may ensure (even if not completely) that the members of the community will indeed refrain, as far as possible, from using Hebrew, and accordingly will be less exposed to the negative influence of the surrounding society.

Were the conservative Admorim successful in this enterprise to “Halakhize” the “prohibition” of Hebrew? It is very doubtful whether this was the case. Among these circles themselves, it would appear that the prohibition did not require such Halakhic reinforcement, since an instruction by the Admor to his followers is a sufficiently strong norm in this community, and does not require an explicitly Halakhic seal of approval. In the case of the more mainstream circles, these Admorim do not seem to have been considered a source of authority, and it is doubtful that they convinced many people to follow their instruction. Nevertheless, in “Litvak” society, awareness of the reservation (on the ideological rather than the practical level) to the “new” language does appear to have been internalized. Now that the use of this language has been recognized Halakhically in these circles, and given that there is no point in prohibiting this use, since it has become widespread among the Haredi public, efforts now focus on rejecting the “defective” words in this language. Treatises warning against the penetration of improper Modern Hebrew words into the spoken language in the Haredi world provide evidence not only of the victory of Hebrew, but also of the desire to minimize this victory, prevent an excessively lax drift toward Hebrew, and effectively restrict the quasi-Halakhic “permission” granted for its use.

We may conclude that non-Halakhic normative developments preceded the Haredi attempt to cloak the prohibition against Hebrew in Halakhic garb, and that such normative developments continued to accompany the prohibition even after various authors had sought to provide it with a Halakhic and textual foundation. The attempt to place both the prohibition and the opposing permission within the confines of Halakhic discourse emerged, on the one hand, by way of an almost inevitable response in the case of a society in which the Halakhic norm is the most authoritative and binding one. On the other hand, however, the partial character, and indeed the partial failure, of this attempt also appear to be almost inevitable, since the “invention of tradition” is not always a simple or easy process. Even after certain individuals sought to imbue the “prohibition against Hebrew” with a Halakhic and textual dimension, it would appear that the motivation for observing this prohibition continues to be due in large part to other normative motives – ideological, educational or even emotional. It is difficult to anchor such motives in a written text, and it is even more difficult to imbue them with the same “halo” that sparks among the observant the attitude of special respect for the Halakhic norm.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Yadler uses the term “Jargon” to refer to Yiddish; though often used pejoratively by denigrators of the language, it was also sometimes used as a neutral term (trans). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Rebbetzin* (Yiddish) literally means a rabbi’s wife, but is also used more generally as a term of respect for a woman; *gveret* (in Hebrew) means Madam or Mrs. (trans.).

    [rest of footnote 18 here:] [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. The Hebrew word for complete – *shalem* – is an acronym of the words for name, language, and dress (trans.).

     [rest of footnote 112 here:] [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)