



Kirsten A. Fudeman. *Vernacular Voices: Language and Identity in Medieval French Jewish Communities.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. xi + 254 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4250-8.



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The French Hebrew Connection

Despite vast scholarship about Jewish life in medieval northern France, we know very little about the languages in which it took place. How widespread was knowledge of Hebrew? Were educated people able to converse in Hebrew or simply to read and write? When Jews spoke French, did they pepper it with Hebrew or Aramaic phrases? Always? Frequently? Rarely? Were they capable of speaking standard French (or, more accurately, the standard local dialect of French) or was the foreignness of their speech recognizable to non-Jews? How many Jews knew Latin? Kirsten A. Fudeman's new book addresses all these questions either directly or indirectly. While she does not give definitive answers to all of them, her meticulous scholarship greatly broadens our understanding of the language mix in the communities of Rashi and his disciples.

Much of her book consists of very careful analysis of two-language texts (which Fudeman calls *âtexts of two colors*) where Jewish authors switch back and forth between Hebrew and French. Fudeman has collected a surprisingly wide variety of such texts, ranging from in-

structions on how to perform a *halitzah* ceremony (to release a couple from the obligation of performing a levirate marriage) to recipes and magical texts. She includes a never-before-published two-language Jewish marriage song, *Uri liqrati yafah, gentis kallah einoreie* (Arise come toward me, beautiful one, noble and worthy bride), and analyzes it extensively.

Fudeman offers reasoned arguments about what purpose might have been served by the choice of language at any given point in each of these texts. Sometimes the choice is easy to understand. For example, one recipe is totally in Hebrew except that the word *âsaffronâ* is in French. Anyone who has listened to a contemporary American Jew speaking Hebrew, or has read the Hebrew writing of contemporary American rabbis, is acquainted with this phenomenon—using Hebrew as far as the speaker/writer can and then throwing in a word or phrase in the vernacular when needed. But at times the language shift in these medieval texts requires a more subtle explanation. For example, Fudeman offers the interesting suggestion that the Hebrew lines in the wed-

ding song are slightly more risqué than the French. She suggests that the author's assumption might have been that women were less likely to understand the Hebrew allusions. The males ostensibly thought that they could have a good chuckle about the sexual innuendo in the song without the women understanding why.

The best known two-language texts from northern France are biblical commentaries that were written almost completely in Hebrew but made use of French to help explain some biblical Hebrew word or phrase (=le'azim). Most of these French insertions—particularly in the works of Rashi and Rashbam—consist only of very short French glosses, most often only one or two words. But Fudeman gathers a few fascinating examples that go beyond this level of bilingualism. One comment of Joseph Qara on Isaiah 66:18 (not in the printed editions of Qara's commentary but attested in manuscripts) reads: "BA'AH: BE-L[A'AZ] 'So me fera avenir e tu m'a[s] doneid SHE-AQABETZ ET KOL HA-GOYIM VEHA-LESHONOT." In the middle of this comment we find a sentence that means "you have allowed that I will gather," written in a very unusual way: the words "you have allowed" are in French, while the words "that I will gather" are in Hebrew (pp. 52-53). Another interesting example of such linguistic hybridity occurs within one word. It is the strange verb, *asqer* (which appears in the Troyes elegy), meaning to study the Torah, built on the Hebrew verb *la'asoq* with the French infinitival ending *âer*.

As in many books, not all the chapters here are equally strong. In chapter 2, "Speech and Silence, Male and Female in Jewish Christian Relations," Fudeman attempts to extract new insights about Jews and Christians and their respective use of language from close analysis of Jewish chronicles about the tragic slaughter of Jews in Blois in 1171. The texts themselves are not examined as specimens of bilingual writing (generally speaking, they are not) but they tell a story that allegedly teaches us

about attitudes to language. Much of the analysis left me unconvinced. In some places, Fudeman's lack of expertise in rabbinic literature mars her discussion of the finer points of the stories.

For example, Fudeman analyzes a subplot in the document known as the Orleans letter, which tells the story of a young man who wanted to marry a young woman whose family forcefully rejected him. So the young man proceeded cunningly, and married the girl before witnesses, and came to her father and said, "Have we not coupled together (*nizdavvagnu*) in spite of you?" (p. 67). The father still rejected the man as a son-in-law, so he angrily went to the gentile authorities and spoke ill of the Jewish community. Fudeman explains that the young man's claim was based on "a biblical law by which consummation creates a de facto marriage" (p. 68). While a case might be made that the texts suggest that the couple had been intimate (depending on how we understand the Hebrew verb *nizdavvagnu*), there is no suggestion here that that intimacy effected a marriage. The text says, "halakh ha-na'ar ... veqiddeh et ha-'ishshah lifnei 'eidim"—i.e., the claim that they were already married was based on the fact that he had given an item of value to the young woman in front of witnesses, reciting the traditional words of betrothal while doing so. In her notes, Fudeman attempts to marshal biblical and rabbinic texts (such as Deuteronomy 22:28-29 and *b'Yevamot* 107a) to prove that consummation effects a marriage. But as scholars of rabbinic Judaism know, those texts are not relevant and the suggestion that consummation (without witnesses) effects a de facto marriage is not the halakhic position.

But when Fudeman sticks to what she does best—careful analysis of difficult texts written in a complicated combination of French and Hebrew—she makes a very significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the world of the Jews of northern France and to our understanding of how Jewish languages work.

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