



A book for Haredim children written by popular orthodox writer Menucha Beckerman.

A new phenomenon

The ultra-orthodox children's literature

Scholars of Israeli children's literature have recently noticed an interesting socio-literary phenomenon: the emergence of an entirely new branch, an ultra-orthodox children's literature.

Adapt to defend the Haredi identity

There is no doubt that the ultra-orthodox community has had to change and adapt to defend its identity in the past years. The community's main problem is how to change to meet challenges without compromising its core beliefs. One example can be the development of a literature for haredi children. In previous generations, children's stories would have been regarded as a waste of time. However, the leaders of the ultra-orthodox community realized that it was not enough to block children's literature, which would instill negative values. It would be necessary to supply a substitute. The books belonging to this special category are easily distinguished from "regular" Israeli children's books by their typical subject content and titles as well as by the fact that their authors and publishers belong to an extremely religious sector. Some of the books are published by general ultra-orthodox publishers such as *Feldheim*, others by children's publishers such as *Zarkor*, etc., while in some cases, the authors publish their own books.

A moral message and educative values

Between 1970 and 1989 the percentage of haredi children's books rose from 5% of the total number of children's books to 20%. This may be linked to the large ultra-orthodox families and to the fact that the children's literature replaces both unsuitable children's literature and television. The genre is not only negative, blocking general children's literature, but also positive, conveying a clear moral message reflecting the community's values.



Stereotypes and political conflicts

The characters tend to be stereotypes, rather than rounded characters. Several books portray a negative picture of the secular society in Israel: the characters belonging to this westernized society are sometimes depicted as ignorant of their heritage, intolerant, disrespectful towards the Jewish religion. They often lead an immoral and licentious lifestyle, pursuing only career and material success, but remaining with feelings of dissatisfaction and emptiness.

In this Beckerman book emphasizing children's love and respect for the parents, two brothers quietly leave the house to school in the morning so as not to wake their sleeping mother, leaving a cheerful note.

On the contrary the life of haredi families is described as tranquil, harmonious and happy. In many of the stories, the mother plays a major positive model role, while the father is busy studying. The haredi children are depicted in a similar positive way, loving their family. Even when problems, frictions and weaknesses occur, there is always a happy ending. Some of the negative descriptions can be explained by the reminiscences of ideological and political conflicts, mainly over religious, cultural and educational issues, between the haredi and religious sectors and the state authorities, from the 1950's and onwards. This literature can be viewed as a mean to educate the young generation with maximal separation from the surrounding general secular culture.

Sources: Chaim Seymour « *Publishing and the Jewish Ultra-orthodox* », Bar-Ilan University, August 2000 <http://archive.ifla.org/IV/ifla66/papers/042-174e.htm> ; Yitzhaki Moshe, Shoham Snunit, « *Ultra-Orthodox Children's Literature in Israel: A Case Study of Sub-Cultural Children's Literature* », Bar-Ilan University, 1996 <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED400856.pdf>