The school library as a "culture agent":
A Case Study of Sub-Cultural school libraries in Israel

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Introduction

Generally speaking, the Jewish population world-wide includes also two traditional sectors: modern orthodox and ultra-orthodox. Large communities of both population sectors exist in Israel and abroad, comprising 30% of Israel's population and about 20% of the Jewish population outside the state of Israel.

Both population sectors are characterized by observance of Jewish law and commandments, placing great emphasis on family life and personal modesty. However, the ultra-orthodox seek to insulate themselves from surrounding secular society and to achieve maximum cultural and social segregation. Striving to minimize their consumption of "secular" media, printed and electronic, they have developed their own subculture and recreational activities, isolated from the mainstream literary life in Israel (Friedman 1991, Zicherman 2014).

While the general Israeli population, particularly youth, spends about a third of its leisure time watching TV, and another third on internet surfing, the ultra-orthodox population sector is totally different in this respect. The vast majority of these families avoid television and in principle do not own one. Many of those possessing home computers are not connected to the internet. Consequently, **reading** remains one of the main leisure activities, creating a constant demand for books, magazines and newspapers (Zicherman and Kahaner 2012).

Justly claiming that all literature conveys some message, and that there is no value-free literature (Karmi-Laniado 1983, Regev 2002), spiritual leaders of the ultra-orthodox communities insist that both adults and youngsters be exposed only to books and other reading materials upholding and promoting the population sector's values and lifestyle. The demographic reality of large families results in a vast population of young book consumers, for whom reading is an alternative to television and the computer.

Both population sectors mentioned above maintain their own separate public educational system, with most schools, but not all, having school libraries of various sizes. These school libraries, together with the community's public libraries, are supposed to fulfill the reading needs of children and youth attending the community schools.

Our assumption was that these school libraries differ considerably from other school libraries serving the non-orthodox population. Since very little research, if any, has focused on this aspect, they warrant an exploratory study, which will hopefully lead the way to additional ones.

Purpose of the study

The main objective of the present exploratory study was to examine the extent to which school libraries in this population sector serve as a "culture agent". More specifically, our aims were:

1. To explore the characteristics of book collections in the sector's school libraries, especially regarding their content and the issue of external or internal censorship.
2. To gain insights concerning the growth rate of book publishing in this sector and its sociological and cultural reasons.
3. To gain insights concerning the authors of this unique children's literature, their motives as well as their opinions and attitudes towards various facets of life and society.

Socio-cultural Background

The ultra-orthodox community constitutes approximately 15% of Israeli society and about 10% (500,000 people) of the Jewish population in North America, mainly in New-York and New-Jersey. Smaller numbers live in Western European countries, mainly in the UK, France and Belgium. This community is a very unique and distinct group, in that it lives with strict adherence to Jewish Law. To an outsider, ultra-orthodox society may seem monolithic, but, in fact, it includes numerous subgroups with different customs and varying degrees of openness to the modern world. Nonetheless, all the subgroups have much in common, as already described by sociologists (Friedman 1991, Zicherman 2014, Zicherman and Kahaner 2012):

1. A strict observance of Jewish commandments and deep faith in Divine Providence and in free will, namely the ability to choose between good or evil.

2. Obedience to spiritual leaders, the rabbis, whose   rulings carry much weight.

3. Attributing paramount importance to the study of Jewish sacred texts, primarily the Talmud.

4. Retaining the traditional division of roles between men and women, with significant changes, however, in recent decades.

5. A cautious view of the modern world and its new technological innovations, like internet, i-phones etc.

6. A closed society with their own communities and settlements, stressing personal integrity and mutual assistance.

7. A separate educational system which inculcates the ultra-orthodox sector principles in the next generation, offering a genuine alternative to modern secular society and culture. Their spiritual and educational leaders strongly oppose, on ideological grounds, any use of 'secular' media, both printed and electronic, including children's books. Thus, they have developed their own subculture and leisure activities, partly isolated from mainstream literary life in Israel.

8. A unique mode of modest dress and separation of sexes in their educational system. Youth are formally introduced by their parents or a professional matchmaker, based on similar background, sub-group affiliation, shared aspirations and financial compatibility.

10. Placing a great emphasis on family life, holding the family as the main institution.

Methods

The ultra-orthodox educational system includes more than 1300 kindergartens, about 700 elementary schools and close to 500 high-schools. Libraries in kindergartens differ considerably, in many aspects, from those in elementary schools and high-schools, and therefore it was decided to focus on libraries in elementary schools, consisting of 1st to 8th grades.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used, including visits to several school libraries, browsing in their collections and interviewing librarians, school students and their parents.   Before studying the collections in-depth, a list was composed of about 3000 books held and over 500 were actually located. Their formal

bibliographical details were recorded, and qualitative research techniques were applied, including in-depth content analysis of several books.

Findings and Discussion

<u>Rate of growth</u>

An enormous increase began in the 1970's, gaining momentum from 1980 on, thus raising their proportion to over 20% of all children's fiction books published in Israel. This dramatic rise apparently resulted from an interesting combination of demographic and socio-educational factors, most of which were already described above, in our introduction.

Thus, publishing has become an important economic branch in this population sector, annually producing thousands of books of all genres: novels, thrillers, etc., intended for youngsters, women, and also men. Publishing became as important as the branches of food, clothing and children toys.

Ultra-orthodox children fiction books, like the adult ones, are easily distinguished from their counterparts by their typical "clean" content as well as by their authors and publishers. All latter ones belong to the ultra-orthodox population sector, whose adults and educational institutions, are the main target-population of these books. These books differs markedly from mainstream Israeli children fiction, both in themes and content. This unique type of children literature is **didactic** (Hovav 1994). For most authors and publishers, their work is not merely a source of livelihood, but a certain calling - a mission that will shape the minds and hearts of future generations.

Former studies already focused on censorship in Israeli school libraries (Yitzhaki 1998, 2001, 2003, Yitzhaki and Sharabi 2005). The current exploratory study, however, has also examined the typical phenomenon of 'self-censorship' in this unique branch of children's literature, published by and for, this specific population sector. The "self-censorship" is manifested in several ways:

1. Adherence to conventions which are deeply rooted in the ultra-orthodox community's system of values. The main characters do not violate Jewish Talmudical law. Most, if not all, books carry explicit or implicit value messages, about the behavior expected of the observant Jew.

2. Absence of any explicit mention of physical or emotional love between men and women, and obviously never graphic descriptions. This stands in sharp contrast to the very common reality of explicit sex descriptions in modern fiction literature.

3. No descriptions of premarital relations, extramarital affairs or spousal betrayal in the family.

4. Surprisingly, content analysis reveals that it is the woman, not the man, who is the real hero of many Ultra-orthodox novels. She is neither glamorous in appearance, nor a careerist super-achiever, but rather a model of good character, with unfailing concern for others, and a conscientious observer of religious laws.

5. Until recently, there was almost no mention of marital problems and conflicts or divorce, topics which were taboo until then. Recently, however, such topics have emerged in several fiction books, like in a 2008 book by the known and prolific authoress Hava Rosenberg, whose father was a known rabbi, and whose grandfather was a leader of a certain Hassidic dynasty. Another author - Hayim Walder - tells the story of a young bride, shocked to discover that her new husband suffers from mental illness, and requires psychiatric medications in order to function.

6. Another aspect of "educational censorship" is usually set by publishers. One of them recently acknowledged in an interview: "Upon receiving a manuscript, we first review the content to ensure that it does not contradict ethical values. Negative emotions, such as envy or hatred, can be mentioned, but must be condemned by the author. Our books should provide guidance and inspiration, since the ultra-orthodox sector reader wants to benefit from reading the book, learn its lessons, and enrich and strengthen her/his personality. As an Ultra-orthodox sector publishing house, it is important for us to fulfill this need, and thus, if we find the book lacking any spiritual or educational benefit, we won't publish it".

We may add that the same considerations probably hold also for the **home** publishing industry of ultra-orthodox books, which comprises about 40% of all Ultra-orthodox sector books.

To sum up, most of the above described is typical of a conservative and traditional society. Scholars of comparative religion can find many parallels to customs of the Puritan society, hundreds of years ago.

Sociologically, such school libraries and the fiction literature they carry and disseminate, can be considered one means by which a religious-cultural minority seeks to inculcate in its readers, a specific sub-culture of maximal separation from general secular culture dominating the general society in which they live.

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