

Ground-breaking book of words

A monk in the Order of the Little Brothers of Jesus has compiled a radical new dictionary of spoken Arabic, based on the Palestinian idiom

By **Moshe Piamenta**

"The New Dictionary of Spoken Arabic and Arabic-Hebrew," by Yohanan Elihay. Published by the Ministry of Defense and Keshet Ltd., pp. 572

The New Dictionary of Spoken Arabic" is based on a number of books previously published by the acclaimed author of dictionaries and language studies in Arabic and other languages, Yohanan Elihay.

The dictionary faithfully reflects the nuances of the Arabic language as spoken in towns and villages since the beginning of the 20th century. It also records the effects wrought on the language by external influences: Arab nationalism on the one hand and socio-religious traditions and the reality of a neighboring, multi-cultural Israeli society on the other. The Palestinian idiom has therefore become standardized, closer to that found in neighboring countries, all of which share an advanced neo-classical vocabulary which increases with the rise in the standard of living and the advances made in science, technology and communications. The dictionary also notes levels of formality and informality in the language.

I have been using Elihay's dictionaries and didactic works for the past 35 years, particularly in my research. "The new Dictionary of Spoken Arabic and Arabic-Hebrew" once more testifies to his linguistic and didactic talents. The material in it is authentic, colorful, edifying and diversified. It was written down exactly as spoken by the Palestinians in daily life and in the media.

The book is based on a shortened version of a popular course in Hebrew-Palestinian Arabic called Speaking Arabic: A New Method" (1988-1993); a "Hebrew-Arabic Dictionary" published by Yanetz; and the "Dictionary of Sentences" compiled by the author in his own handwriting and recorded from Palestinian sources (1974). This was in turn preceded by a two-volume "Course for Spoken Palestinian Arabic," published in French and translated into English.

Elihay is also the author of a French-language study of Judeo-Christian relations throughout history, published by Le Cerf, Paris. In addition, there is "The Hebrew Verb - Exercises: 500 verbs in 4,000 sentences for Russian speakers," published by Keshet, Jerusalem (1991), and a version for French speakers (1993), published jointly with the University of Lille, France.

The story of the author's life is no less fascinating than his work. He was baptized John Leroy in 1926 in a small town near Paris. His father died

when he was six. At the age of eighteen, after the liberation of Paris in 1944, he went to a screening of films in the United States Embassy in Paris that showed the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews in Nazi concentration camps. Deeply shaken by what he saw, he vowed to dedicate his life to God and help the needy and distressed, regardless of race or religion. Two years later he opted for national service rather than the army, and having studied English, German, Latin and Greek in high school, he became a French teacher in Lebanon. Following a chance encounter with a Jew en route to his new post, the man gave him a Hebrew textbook.

In Lebanon he studied literary Arabic and idiomatic Lebanese - in which he was particularly interested - so he could talk directly with the people. He would walk around with bits of paper in his pockets, listening and jotting down Lebanese words, expressions and sentences. In this way he succeeded in compiling a personal dictionary of the Arabic spoken in Lebanon. In 1947 he returned to the south of France to attend the Dominican Seminary there. He studied Christian and religious affairs, psychology, history, Biblical Hebrew and Italian, and became a member of the Order of "Little Brothers of Jesus" headquartered in London. He wore civilian clothes and, living a modest life of prayer and devotion, helped the community.

He came to Israel in 1956 and settled in Jaffa, was granted Israeli citizenship in 1960 and changed his name to Yohanan Elihay ("The Lord is the purpose of my life"). As he perfected his Hebrew, he began to prepare the Palestinian Arabic dictionary, using the same method he had devised in Lebanon to record the living language.

In 1965 Elihay moved to the village of Tarshikha near Ma'alot in the Galilee to live with friends. Here he lived as modestly as he had in France and thoroughly studied the spoken language, using it in his everyday life. He has a native command of both Hebrew and Arabic without a trace of his own French accent in either.

The late Prof. Haim Blank, a colleague of mine in the Arabic department at the Hebrew University, one of the great scholars and researchers of Arab dialects and a mutual friend of Elihay, urged him not to confine his books on spoken Palestinian Arabic to French readers, but also to publish them for Hebrew readers.

Elihay's latest excellent work is based on the Palestinian idiom as spoken in Israel, in the territories of the Palestinian Authority and in Jordan, and anyone interested in the idiom would do well to have a copy.

The dictionary is in alphabetical order. The Hebrew equivalent of the Arabic is fully punctuated for correct pronunciation using large print and spacing. Values are set out clearly and precisely, with glosses on meanings. The numerous examples given are natural and credible and the Hebrew is often accompanied by vivid verbal translations of the Arabic, aimed at explaining cultural background. Appendices include detailed verb charts and rules of grammar for construction of the texts referred to in the lessons.