

The Hebrew Revolution and the Revolution of the Hebrew Language between the 1880s and the 1930s

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The new Hebrew culture which began to crystallize in the land of Israel from the end of the last century, is a successful event of "cultural planning". During a relatively short period of time a little group of "culture planners" succeeded in creating a system which in a significant way was adapted to the requested Zionist ideology. The fact that the means by which the "cultural planning" was realized implicated a heroic presentation of the happenings that led to a pathological view of the development. It presented the new historical occurrences in Palestine as a renaissance and not as a continuation of Jewish history, as a break and not as continuity of the past.

The decision to create a political and a Hebrew cultural renaissance was laid down by the pioneers of the second Aliyah (1904-1914), the leading group in the land during two decades. As the pioneers of the second Aliyah stuck to the spoken Hebrew language, they transformed the practice into a holy principle and used every means in order to implant it.

Eliezer Ben Yehudah (Perlman) (who correctly or incorrectly is said to be the father of the new Hebrew language) immigrated to the land in 1881 and hitched his wagon to the hard work of the renewal of the spoken Hebrew language. Ben Yehudah saw in spoken Hebrew a miraculous remedy which would give life its value and content, and would solve all cultural problems. His saying was: "Speak Hebrew and you will be healthy".

Eliezer Ben Yehudah was born in 1858, Ben Gurion in 1886, and Berl Kazenelson in 1887.

As a man who was not active in the socialist Jewish movement Ben Yehudah's dedication to Hebrew is probably comprehensible. But why should a prominent socialist like Berl Kazenelson stick to the spoken Hebrew language? A man, who prior to his immigration to Palestine was an anti-Zionist, ridiculed Hebrew and was an enthusiastic devotee of Yiddish?

The explanation is to be found in the vital necessity which was felt by the pioneers of the second Aliyah to achieve at all costs a break from the past, from the large world of the Russian revolutionary movements, from Russian culture, and Jewish Russian culture. This break was the main condition that made it possible for the pioneers to strike root in the land. The superb tool to enforce the breaking off was the Hebrew language and thought, which in this way would sever the connection with the past and thereby allow something new to strike root in an entirely different ground.

From the commencement of the first Aliyah (1881) and till the establishment of the state of Israel a culture developed within the new Jewish Yishuv in the land of Israel which gradually became exclusive, unique and different, both from that of the old Yishuv and from that of the Jews in other countries.

This culture I will designate as Hebrew not because it is bound to the Hebrew language but

principally because of the specific meaning of this term which began to crystallize inside this culture itself in the period under discussion.

Throughout the period which began with the new Yishuv (1880s) and up to the establishment of the state, the word 'Hebrew' to a great extent denoted "The Jews of the land of Israel", in other words Jews who were not typical of the Jews in the Diaspora. 'Hebrew' meant "The new Jewish Israeli man—in the land of Israel". It is no accident that in the Israeli Declaration of Independence the terms 'Hebrew' and 'Jew' are used in different contexts. Thus it is said: "We stretch out a hand of peace to all the neighbouring states and appeal to them to cooperate with the independent Hebrew nation in its land . . ."; *vis-à-vis* "Our call goes out to the Jewish people in the Diaspora . . .". But there is no doubt that after 1948 the use of 'Hebrew' declines gradually in favour of 'Jew', and the common denominator of "the Jews" overcomes the difference between 'Hebrew' and 'Jews'.

The Jewish culture in Eastern Europe was looked upon by the pioneers as a declining, sinking and negative culture. In their eyes one ought to get rid of this culture and free oneself from its negative components. The assimilated Jew wished to extricate himself totally from it.

The first pioneers in the 1880s—the so-called Hibbat Zion pioneers—and later the Zionist pioneers who absorbed the philosophy of the Jewish Enlightenment, saw only one way to extricate themselves from Jewish culture: namely through the return of the nation to a "pure", "authentic" existence in its land. The concept of this existence was part of the spirit of the romantic literature in general, and in Hebrew literature in particular, which dealt with "the early ancient history of the nation in its old ancient land". Many of the negative stereotypes which the gentiles had about Jews were absorbed by the young pioneers into their philosophy. Both in the literature of the Enlightenment and in the romantic literature the Jews were presented as detached from reality, rootless, weak, dishonest, incapable of working, haters of drink and food, dissociated from nature, etc.

The total negation of Jewish existence in

the Diaspora brought about profound upheavals. The transition to manual work (principally agriculture), tilling the soil, self-defence and use of weapons, changing from Jewish to other clothes (including the bedouin and cherkessian garb), changing from Yiddish (the despised language of the exile) to a new spoken language—Hebrew, which at one and the same time was regarded as the authentic and ancient tongue, adapting the Sephardi pronunciation of the syllables and not the Ashkenazi, changing foreign family names to Hebrew names—all this was part of the realization of the "new Hebrew man" in contrast to the "Diaspora Jew".

It must be emphasized that the decision to establish Hebrew as a spoken language in the last two decades of the 19th century was not generally agreed upon nor accepted, even by central figures who participated in the creation of the new-old Hebrew language. Neither did it immediately gain a hearing among the pioneers of the first Aliyah. On the contrary: there was objection to give priority to the Hebrew language in the settlements. Practical knowledge of Hebrew was quite limited. For example in the settlement of Rishon Lezion there was strong resistance against the establishment of a Hebrew high school. Teachers who wanted to establish such a school, were practically forced to leave the settlement. Finally, the high school was established in Yaffo.

There are many evidences from the period which point at the fact that Hebrew cannot be regarded as being a real living language in the pioneering settlements of the first Aliyah. The mastery of the language was defective and partial. The preference of the Sephardi syllable-pronunciation cannot be explained exclusively by the fact that the Sephardi community in Jerusalem supported spoken Hebrew, nor by the fact that Nisim Bechar opened the Kiah school in Jerusalem for the Hebrew language (Kiah is the Hebrew name of the Franco-Jewish "Alliance" Organization), nor by the fact that Eliezer Ben Yehudah was apparently persuaded by the judgement of a priest working in the French Hospital in Jerusalem who gave a verdict in favour of the Sephardi pronunciation.

The most important point of these two de-

cisions: to accept Hebrew and to do it in the Sephardi form, is that the Hebrew language represented the opposition to Yiddish, and that the Sephardi pronunciation represented the opposition to the Ashkenazi. That is to say they formed an opposition to the "exile", to the "Diaspora", to the old. This condition formed a much stronger factor than any principle or learned discussion about the "correct pronunciation".

During the second half of the 1920s the Hebrew revolution which passed over the new Hebrew Yishuv was at its highest. Zionist ideology as well as cultural and social activities were dominated by the idea that it is necessary to strive truly and honestly towards the creation of a new Hebrew nation and a new Hebrew man in the land of Israel, i.e. no longer Jewish but Hebrew. In speech and writing this new Israeli man and his institutions were very often accompanied by the adjective *'ivri*, Hebrew (in plural *'ivriyîm*, differentiating them from Jews in the Diaspora and their institutions. Hence the designation "the Hebrew Yishuv", "the Hebrew man", "the general organization of the Hebrew workers". Tel Aviv was the first Hebrew city, the settlements were Hebrew, and later came the political demand for a Hebrew state.

Cultural and educational institutions in which fostering the Hebrew language constituted a central element were provided with the adjective Hebrew in their names. The university in Jerusalem was called "The Hebrew University in Jerusalem". In Haifa the institution for the training of engineers was called "The Hebrew Institute of Technology". The establishment of Hebrew as its main language at the eve of the First World War could only take place after a hard and bitter struggle known as "The Language War". The first gymnasium in Tel Aviv was called "The Hebrew Gymnasium Herzeliyah", and the gymnasium established a year later in Jerusalem was simply "The Hebrew Gymnasium". Thus also "The Hebrew Authors' Association", "The Hebrew Artists' Association", "The Hebrew Theatre", and "The Hebrew Opera". The struggle for conquering the work in Palestine was done for the sake of "Hebrew work".

What is the meaning of this distinction between Hebrew and Jew, between Hebraism and Judaism? The important philosopher of culture and art Ja'acov Klazkin (1882-1948) negated totally the Zionist Diaspora. Already in 1920 he understood the significance of the process which was taking place in the land of Israel. In an article published in the New York periodical *Miklat Shelter*, he maintained that clear differences between the new Hebrew Yishuv in the land of Israel and the Jews in the Diaspora was emerging. Both established, according to Klazkin, separate national entities. The more the character of the new Hebrew Yishuv in the land crystallized the more the difference between them would grow stronger. Then, Klazkin maintained, the Jewish people would be divided into two groups: a Hebrew group in the land of Israel and a Jewish group in the Diaspora.

Uri Zvi Greenberg—the greatest Hebrew poet in the 20th century—gave expression to a similar feeling when he in 1925 spoke about "The Hebrew people in Eretz Israel who came into being from the Jewish people in the Diaspora", but he states, "in the beginning of the history of the people, the children of Israel were not Jews but Hebrews, since after all the desert did not know Jews at all, but only the Hebrews".

The general negation of the Diaspora in Klazkin's philosophy, which I will mention only in passing, can be divided into four separate negations: the negation of foreign culture—European culture, or, more precisely, the part of this culture which was unable to contribute to the creation of the new Hebrew culture; the negation of spirituality, the negation of religion, and the negation of Yiddish.

The negation of Yiddish and the exchange of it with Hebrew was understood as a supreme national and cultural task. "As the English speak English and the French speak French, thus the Hebrews speak Hebrew", explained Ja'acov Bluvstein, the brother of the famous poetess Rahel, in an article written in 1925. And actually, the slogan "Hebrew man, speak Hebrew!" was on the lips of everybody, painted on walls, printed in announcements and on posters, thundered and shouted in proces-

sions and gatherings where Yiddish was spoken instead of Hebrew.

When the demand to speak Hebrew—always and everywhere—did not receive an immediate favourable reply by everyone, a "Troop for the Defence of the Hebrew Language" was founded in the Hebrew Gymnasium Herzeliyah. It wasn't afraid of using any means conceivable in order to impose the use of Hebrew language in public meetings, in cultural events and performances, in the streets and on street signs.

Members of the troop disturbed theatre plays in Yiddish, broke up Yiddish conferences, marched in crowds in the first Hebrew city Tel Aviv, destroyed posters and signs written in foreign languages and taught the new immigrants Hebrew voluntarily.

The troop appointed as their "commander" the national poet *par excellence* H.N. Bialik after his immigration into the land in 1923. But its uncompromising fanaticism knew no limits. Thus, when the national poet sinned (according to the formulation of the troop), in speaking a foreign language (Russian), he was brought before the tribunal of the "Troop for the Defence of the Hebrew language" where an enormous crowd was assembled. He was sentenced to ask the members' of the troop forgiveness in the three local daily newspapers, and to send his picture to the troop in order to have it publicly exposed. In 1927 two of the greatest writers of Yiddish literature, Shalom Ash and Perez Hirshbein, visited the land, and the Hebrew Authors' Association welcomed them. As the chairman of the association H.N. Bialik had the task of opening the meeting. According to many present at the occasion, the things Bialik said discredited him and testified to his incompetence to hold the title "Chairman of the Hebrew Authors' Association".

In his opening speech Bialik said, *inter alia*, that Yiddish and Hebrew is a heavenly match, and cannot be separated, as Ruth and Naomi (from the Book of Ruth). These words of heresy raised a violent storm which did not abate. Shlonski, the future leading poet, wrote: "We look upon this tribulation of two languages as a consumption of the lungs which gnaws at the lungs of the nation. Our desire is that the Israeli breath will be entirely Hebrew, with

both of its lungs". The controversy spread and involved quite a few communities in the Diaspora. Actually, the blazing hatred between the two camps did not fade away until the last years of the 1930s when the second World War broke and settled the matter in its own terrible way.

The decision to take over the Sephardi pronunciation in speaking was first and foremost an expression of the rejection of Yiddish, since the Sephardi pronunciation was considered as representing a contrast to, and to be in opposition to the spirit of the Ashkenazi pronunciation.

In his book *The Populations of Eretz Israel* published in 1929, Yitzhak Ben Zvi emphasizes the Oriental character of the Sephardi community. It can be seen, he says, in their clothing, in their customs, and in their pronunciation of Hebrew. When compared to the Ashkenazi Jews, Ben Zvi writes, the Sephardi and the Oriental Jews had preserved fine and minute distinctions in the guttural phonemes, as well as in some of the tongue and palatal sounds. These distinctions were functionally parallel and similar to those existing within the Semitic languages spoken by the nations among whom the Oriental Jews lived. The Sephardi pronunciation was thus regarded as the correct and authentic one. Ben Zvi wrote that the Hebrew Yishuv in Palestine entered into a compromise: it accepted mainly the elements of Sephardi pronunciation regarding the vowels and established it in daily speech. Likewise, it accepted the pronunciation with an accent on the final syllable called *milra*, which is the rule in the land of Israel to this very day.

At the end of the last century there was already a consensus among the Jewish writers who lived in Tsarist Russia that the Sephardi pronunciation was the "authentic" and correct one. But this recognition did not prevent any Hebrew poet—beginning with H.N. Bialik, and continuing to the generation of Shlonski thirty years later—from writing in Slavic metre according to Ashkenazi reading, or from following the Ashkenazi pronunciation in their writings. It was not until in the 1920s that the victory of the Sephardi rhythm eventually took place in Hebrew poetry.

In 1927 Rahel published her first book of poems *Safiah* (Aftergrowth)—all of it intended to be read in Sephardi rhythm. At the same time Y. Lamdan's famous book *Massada* was published, also intended to be read in Sephardi rhythm.

Thus it can be stated that from the mid-1920s more and more poets were influenced by Israeli speech—the Sephardi—and began to write their poems in accordance with the Israeli accentuation.

Thus the establishment of the Yishuv entailed a series of decisions in the area of the selection of culture, decisions dependent upon and influencing the ideology which was involved in this enterprise. Thereby the selection was turned into a matter where clear decisions necessarily had to be taken.

Common to most of the different groups and movements in Palestine was the recognition of the fact that the new Palestinian existence needed a revolution not only in the political and social consciousness of the people, but also a spiritual revolution—a radical change of cultural values, which would find expression in literature, theatre, architecture, music, dance, painting etc. The contribution of cultural works to the spiritual revolution was regarded as being of supreme importance. The creative artist does not only reflect and document the spiritual alternations, but creates them, performs them. Thus the Hebrew artists had a pioneering task which was not smaller than the task of those who were building roads or were tilling the soil. The latter redeemed the land, and the former the nation—creating a new Hebrew culture for a new Hebrew nation. To exemplify the Hebrew Revolution more precisely and clearly I will deal shortly with the choosing of personal names during the period under discussion.

The most common personal names which were chosen by the Jews in the new Yishuv manifest among others the following factors:

1. A general identification with the Jewish people by means of names which can be termed "Classical Hebrew Jewish".
2. Acceptance of their own identity, that is to say, a native Israeli self-identification by

means of "new Hebrew" names which include *inter alia* old biblical names, some of which were revived after not having been in usage for 2000 years.

3. Acceptance of some exile-diaspora identity by means of varying "exilic" names, Hebrew and no-Hebrew ones.
4. Identification with the gentile world—a foreign identification by means of merely foreign names.
5. A double identification by means of mixed names.

Between 1882 and 1920 the common distribution of classical Jewish-Hebrew names among the children born in the land of Israel indicated a strong affinity of the Yishuv to the Jewish people generally, and simultaneously an escape from the gentile world.

Jewish-Hebrew classical names were names of males, like Avraham, Mordekhai, Eliyahu, Yitzhak, Shlomo, and female names like Rahel, Ester, Sarah, Rivkah, Yehudit.

A steep increase in the popularity of new Hebrew names in the period between 1921 and 1944 testified to the simultaneous growth and expansion of the Israeli native identification. This rapid growth took place at the expense of the Israelis' identification with Jewish values, which accordingly diminished in these years. In this period the process of the symbolic withdrawal of the Yishuv within its territorial shell intensified the tendency to evade the gentile world. But in addition to that, the Israeli Yishuv in increasing numbers now began to withdraw from the Jews in the Diaspora. Thus they developed a local isolationist type of national identification—the native Israeli, while they were seeking and finding plenty of rare biblical names which now were brought to new life. The majority of these names are names of heroes, brave men, men of action or the like. Popular names given to males in this period are *inter alia*: Yoav, Giora, Asaf, Eitan, Ehud, Avner, Uzi, Dan, Yair, Oded.

Thus the years between 1921 and 1944 can be characterized as the ascending years of the native identification: the epoch of the Hebrew Israeli man as a biblical hero of ancient times—prior to the diaspora.

Explanatory Notes

Old Yishuv: Palestine's/Israel's Jewish Community before 1882. The old Yishuv—which was maintained predominantly by Jewish charity funds raised in the Diaspora and which was committed to a strictly religious way of life—showed no interest in developing institutions of self-government. It was divided into Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities, which had little contact with each other. Each community maintained its own charitable institutions. Regarding themselves as they did as a purely religious group devoted entirely to the study and strict observance of the Torah, the Jews of the old Yishuv had no political ambitions and thus no need to set up their own self-governing institutions.

New Yishuv: 1882–1948. Unlike the old Yishuv, the pioneers of the new Yishuv primarily regarded themselves not as members of a religious community, but as a part of a national entity. They sought to develop a Jewish community in Palestine that would not depend on charity but be self-supporting and productive. This attitude, along with the problems and challenges they faced as modern pioneers, led them to develop institutions of self-government in Palestine/Eretz Israel.

Aliyah (immigration). Aliyah is a basic concept and ideal in Zionist pioneering ideology. Aliyah meant more than more immigration to and settlement in Palestine/Eretz Israel. It implied, as the literal meaning of the Hebrew word 'aliyah' (ascent) indicates, the fulfilment of an ideal and, at the same time, the elevation of one's personality to a higher ethical level.

First Aliyah: Wave of Jewish immigration that reached Palestine/the land of Israel between 1882 and 1904. Most of the immigrants of the period came from Russia, Romania and Galicia. Many had been in the Hoveve Zion or Hibbat Zion movement (Lovers of Zion). The difference between the old Yishuv and these immigrants was that the latter were pioneers, seeking to rebuild the Jewish nation by setting up farms and agricultural villages outside the four "holy cities" of Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias and Hebron.

Second Aliyah: Designation of the wave of immigration to Palestine, predominantly from Zarist Russia, which began at the time of the revolutionary movement and the ensuing pogroms in 1904–05 and came to an abrupt end at its peak with the outbreak of World War I. The total number of immigrants in the Second Aliyah is estimated at 40,000, many of whom later left the country, largely because of the limited economic opportunities. Those who persevered, however, laid the foundations of a new social, cultural and political order and left an impact which was to dominate the inner life of Palestine's Jewish community for two generations to come.

Hibbat Zion (Love of Zion): a movement that came into being in 1882 as a direct reaction to the widespread pogroms in Russia in the 1880s for the purpose of encouraging Jewish settlement in Palestine/Eretz Israel and achieving a Jewish national revival there.

Education in the old Yishuv and the new Yishuv: Prior to the First Aliyah, Jewish educational institutions in Palestine/Eretz Israel consisted almost entirely of religious schools such as Heders, Kuttabs (religious elementary schools of the Oriental Jews), Talmud Torahs, and Yeshivot, as in the other communities of the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and other areas where modern Jewish schools had not been established at that time.

The following decades saw the establishment, both in towns and in the new settlements, of a variety of kindergartens, elementary schools and trade schools. Most of the new schools were founded by Jewish philanthropic organizations from countries in the Diaspora. These schools were not different from other schools founded by the above organizations in other countries; that is, the medium of instruction was a foreign language, with Hebrew occupying a secondary position. At that time for these organizations Palestine/the land of Israel was just another country, and they never envisaged Jewish education in Palestine/the land of Israel as the basis of the new Jewish life. The teachers came from the home countries of the respective organizations and taught in their native languages. Side by side with these insti-

tutions a development took place of schools of a national-Hebraic type, founded by the Zionist pioneers and representing the ideals of the Hebrew renaissance. At an early stage, under the influence of Eliezer Ben Yehudah and his disciples, Jewish subjects began to be taught in Hebrew in the schools administered by the foreign philanthropic organizations, but it was only in the schools of the modern settlers that attempts were made to teach secular subjects in Hebrew as well.

The hebraization of the schools continued despite immense difficulties which included, above all: the scepticism of parents with regard to the revival of Hebrew, the opposition of many French assimilated officials who administered the settlements of the Jewish Colonization Association, and the objective problems posed by Hebrew, which was not yet adequate to serve as the language of instruction for sciences and other secular subjects.

Eliezer Ben Yehudah (1857–1922): When the pioneers of the First Aliyah arrived in Palestine/Eretz Israel in the 1880s, it seemed natural to adopt Hebrew as their vernacular. In the first place, Hebrew was the language associated from time immemorial with the Land of Israel. Second, Hebrew would serve as the natural medium of communication between the Ashkenazi pioneers who spoke Yiddish and European languages and the Sephardi 'old timers' whose languages had been Ladino or Arabic.

The man who most prominently was associated with early efforts to revive the Hebrew language was Eliezer Ben Yehudah who discovered the conversational potential of the language while socializing with a Hebrew-speaking intelligentsia in Paris. He was again impressed, in Algiers, by the fluency with which members of the local Jewish community spoke the language of the Bible. Once settled in Palestine in 1881, he directed all his energies towards the fulfilment of his dream: the reestablishment of Hebrew as the spoken language of Jewry at large. At first Ben Yehudah encountered ridicule from skeptics who did not believe it was possible to revive the language, as well as opposition from some extreme Orthodox circles that objected to the "profanation" of the "sacred tongue" by using it for everyday purposes. The

revival of Hebrew involved also serious particular difficulties because of the vocabulary gap between a language which for many centuries had been used only as a literary vehicle and the requirements of daily life. Hebrew writers and translators had formed new Hebrew words. Following their tradition, Ben Yehudah and his collaborators set out to broaden the language, coining new words on a large scale, mostly based on roots already existing in the language. Ben Yehudah himself contributed significantly to the new vocabulary. In 1910 he began compiling his *Milon* (dictionary). Wherever feasible, he garnered and defined vocabulary of the past: from the Bible, the Talmud, and the works of the medieval Spanish writers. However, when no words were available for a particular sense, Ben Yehudah did not hesitate to adapt obscure or outdated biblical terms to new uses. He also borrowed from other languages, always imposing the Hebrew grammar on the words either by the use of the proper prefix or suffix, or by subjecting the words to the proper conjugations. And when neither adaptation nor borrowing met the need, he simply invented. Some of his coinages did not take root and dropped out of the language by and by, yet many others are now firmly established. The bulk of Ben Yehudah's *Milon* appeared during his lifetime; a group of scholars completed the task after his death. Eliezer Ben Yehudah also helped found the Va'ad Ha-Lashon (Council of the Language) which had the task to preside over the formidable task of keeping Hebrew up to date while preserving its purity. Today that task is carried out by the Academy of the Hebrew Language.

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