

HEBREW: A LANGUAGE REBORN

by JOEL M. HOFFMAN

EXILE

The Jewish exile at the hands of the Romans in the year 70 drove the Jews out of Jerusalem and nearly drove Hebrew out of the Jews.

Hebrew had been the combined spoken, written and holy language of the Jewish People for a millennium. And though it was already in danger of decline by the year 70, the exile was the nail in the proverbial coffin that seemingly sealed the fate of spoken Hebrew.

Aramaic, already popular around the time of the exile, largely replaced Hebrew, becoming not only the Jewish *lingua franca* but, later, the language of the Talmud.

As they spread around the world, Jews picked up various local dialects: Arabic in Northern Africa; Arabic and Spanish on the Iberian Peninsula; German in Ashkenaz (modern-day Germany); French, Russian and more. Two of these, in particular, proved so popular that even as Jews continued to migrate, they took with them their new linguistic apparatus. The post-Crusade German from Ashkenaz (with other influences) became Yiddish, and the Spanish from 15th-Century Spain became Ladino.

Even a century and a half ago, Jews generally spoke a local language as well as either Yiddish or Ladino. Hebrew was primarily a holy tongue, the language of Torah and prayer and, to a lesser extent, a medium of high art. But there was no significant established community using Hebrew as the language of daily discourse, and no reason to think that — after nearly 2,000 years of disuse — Hebrew would ever regain that role in Jewish life. Hebrew, like Latin, was largely assumed to be a language of the past.

THE PATH TO REBIRTH IN ISRAEL

Into this context a man named Eliezer Yitzhak Perelman was born in January, 1858. His life would take him from the village of his birth in Lithuania to Palestine, and his ideas would put him at the forefront of a modern miracle.

Known better by his assumed name of Eliezer Ben Yehuda (Eliezer “son of Judah”), he proposed the then-absurd idea that Hebrew should be revived as a spoken language of daily,

secular life. His ideas, published at age 21, earned him the scorn and mockery of the Jewish intellectual giants of the day and the charge of sacrilege from religious leaders. But Ben Yehuda plowed forward, undaunted. Perhaps because of his conflict with Eastern European Jewish religious leaders, Ben Yehuda generally opted for Sephardi Hebrew pronunciation over the Yiddish-sounding Ashkenazi dialect as he worked to reinvent Hebrew.

Ben Yehuda and his wife forced spoken Hebrew upon their son, Itamar, who was born in 1882 and a few years later became the first native speaker of Modern Hebrew.

Other native speakers soon followed. The first Hebrew-speaking kindergarten in the world was opened in 1898 in the secular city of Rishon Le-Zion (“First to Zion”) in Palestine. It complemented Yiddish-speaking schools in more religious settlements like Petah Tikva (“Portal of Hope,” a reference from the Book of Hosea, where the phrase represents the redemption of Israel). The model in Rishon Le-Zion proved successful, and by 1913 Palestine was home to more than five dozen Hebrew-speaking institutions. Only a university was lacking.

So as the German-oriented *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden* (Benefit Society for German Jews) was completing the construction of a university to be called the Technikum, many people wanted Hebrew to be the language of instruction. After all, French had all but disappeared from the educational scene in Palestine, despite Baron de Rothschild’s enormous financial influence. Certainly German could be replaced by Hebrew, too.

The Technikum’s *Kuratorium* (board of trustees) disagreed, however, insisting instead on German.

In February 1914, just as construction on the Technikum was coming to an end, the American members of the *Kuratorium* switched sides in the language debate and opted for Hebrew over German. In response, the founders of the *Hilfsverein* resigned and even tried to scuttle the whole project. But it was too late. Though the school remained closed during World War I, when the doors finally opened in 1924, the institution had assumed a Hebrew name: the Technion. And the language of instruction was Hebrew.

THE PATH TO REBIRTH IN AMERICA

Two decades before Eliezer Ben Yehuda’s birth, a woman named Rebecca Gratz looked around her home city of Philadelphia and lamented the “mental impoverishment” of the Jews. A prominent voice in her community, she responded by

founding the country’s first Jewish Sunday School. Gratz was addressing both the lack of religious education and the general paucity of secular education at the time. Until the middle of the 19th Century, education in America was generally available only to the wealthy.

At first, Hebrew was nowhere to be found. In a break with traditional Jewish learning, Gratz’s school used English as its language of instruction. Like many German Jews of the time, Gratz eschewed the particularistic elements in Judaism, including a private language. Gratz’s approach gave Jews a pathway to Jewish learning that didn’t demand that they give up their secular lives, but it came at the expense of Hebrew, which wouldn’t be introduced until years later and with only limited success.

Gratz’s model of schooling endured and was ultimately mimicked on a wide scale, producing the now ubiquitous synagogue-based Hebrew Schools. (The public-education movement in America hindered the establishment of Jewish day schools, which didn’t become mainstream until the middle of the 20th Century.)

How did Hebrew enter the field? In an endearing *quid-pro-quo*, the Hebrew-speaking movement in Israel (which had been bolstered by the Americans on the Technion’s *Kuratorium*) fostered an eventual love of Hebrew in America. As Zionism grew, thanks in part to American leaders such as Louis Brandeis, so did the Hebrew language in America. Hebrew schools and, later, day schools, became the vessels through which most American Jews were exposed to Hebrew.

Americans generally continued to learn the familiar European Ashkenazi dialect of Hebrew. It would take the Six Day War in 1967, which almost destroyed the fledgling state of Israel, to push American Hebrew into alignment with the Hebrew spoken in Israel. But even with this reinforced cultural connection, few Americans learned to speak Hebrew, instead by and large relegating the language to the realm of liturgy.

THE LIVING LANGUAGE OF HEBREW

Today, Modern Hebrew has become the national language of the Jewish State, the language of Noble laureates in literature and of teenagers text-messaging.

Indeed, the Hebrew most people thought to be dead was really just dormant, waiting patiently to surprise the world as part of a modern-day miracle that the Israeli songwriter Naomi Shemer compared to “thousands of shining suns.” In living proof of her words, of course, Shemer wrote in Hebrew. ■

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