

Tel Aviv and the Flowering of Jewish Renewal

Ruth Calderon

THREE TEL AVIV MOMENTS

It was the early hours of the morning in a quiet Tel Aviv street. My dog and I were out for our morning walk. The Municipality's garbage truck came around the corner making a deafening noise, and three workers jumping from behind it—a kibbutznik recently released from the army, a Russian immigrant still with a heavy accent, and a black youth, probably a foreign worker—called out hello to me as usual. On the side of the truck I make out an illustrated poster with a poem by the famous poet Yehuda Amichai. This is Tel Aviv's Hebrew Poetry Project, which aims to expose the city's residents to poems hanging on the side of garbage trucks, pasted on to bus shelters, and dangling from the avenues' trees.

Lunchtime on Friday, I am strolling among the stalls of the Carmel Market. When I stop next to the public lavatories, between the falafel stand and the flowers, I notice a silhouette of Herzl sprayed on the wall accompanied by the words, "Don't want to, don't have to." After a moment's reflection, I understand the painful message. The graffiti is a parody of Herzl's famous words: "If you want it, it is not a fairytale"....

It is 3:00 A.M., and 2,000 people of all ages and affiliations are wandering through the halls of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art at Alma Hebrew College's Tikkun Leil Shavuot, a contemporary, cultural alternative to an ancient tradition of all-night study on the holiday.

What is happening in Tel Aviv? Is this Judaism? Two things connect all these events: they are relevant to the present-day life of Jews living in Israel, and they draw from the ancient Jewish bookcase.

This is Hebrew culture in Tel Aviv circa 2009, a city that is a vigorous Jewish space allowing the creative expression of Jewish life in all its diversity. Tel Aviv, the first Hebrew city, is the only urban space in the world where there is a Jewish majority and the spoken living language is Hebrew. It is here that the Hebrew cultural renaissance took root and has lately taken off.

The momentum of this renaissance resulted from the interaction between individual ground-breakers in Israel and North America, who together refined Zionist Judaism. On the institutional level, the UJA-Federation of New York was a pioneer in the identification and support of this cultural process from its outset, by providing both programmatic and financial support for a variety of initiatives, thereby helping propel the Hebrew culture movement into the 21st century. UJA-Federation has been particularly active in Tel Aviv—the hub of Israeli cultural creation—and a beacon for other federations to follow here and in other locations throughout Israel.

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HOW IT ALL BEGAN

It began with the Spiritual Zionists, a ground-breaking group of thinkers—among them Gershom Scholem, Ahad Ha'Am, Bialik, Ben Zion, Leah Goldberg, Berdichevsky, Brenner, and others—who formulated the idea of “Hebrew culture” in Odessa and in Tel Aviv as far back as the beginning of the 19th century. Religion was no longer a real common denominator among world Jewry, solidarity was being weakened, and Jewish identity faced a crisis. Secularity and modernity led to this crisis, as a majority of the Jewish public from traditional communities sought the integration of Jewish culture into the cultures of the world.

Within the Zionist movement there developed a faction of thinkers who saw the essence of Zionism as a cultural renaissance. In their eyes, Hebrew culture was the main source of Jewish rebirth, based on the revival of the Hebrew language. They took upon themselves to speak Hebrew and to translate into Hebrew the great works of the Jewish people and chosen works from world literature.

Bialik's program for a revival revolution of Hebrew culture was based on three principles: Hebrew, a creative community, and compilation.

1. Hebrew: The element connecting Jews all over the world, transcending differences in worldview and way of life, is the Hebrew language. Knowledge of the language is the requisite condition for cultural partnership, for national creativity. The words, the symbols, the stories, the characters, and the narratives make up the cloth of Jewish imagination.

2. Creative communities: The rabbinical “*Talmid Hacham*” (Talmud scholar) is replaced by a new cultural hero: the creative artist. Bialik believed that the leading elite of intellectuals—the artists, the poets, the writers, the playwrights, the educators—are the builders of cultural revival and the shapers of the new Jewish public space. To resurrect Hebrew culture there is a need for a significant community of Hebrew speakers who are well versed in tradition.

3. Compilation project: Similar to previous canonizations in Jewish culture that produced the Mishnah and Talmud, Bialik dreamt of creating a compilation project—the Hebrew library—from the best of Jewish tradition from all the ages, whose publication in Hebrew would allow direct and easy access for all to this national treasure.

WHY DID THE RENAISSANCE NOT HAPPEN AT THAT TIME?

For many reasons the emphasis shifted away from the cultural endeavor toward political Zionism. After the Holocaust, work concentrated on rescue and rehabilitation and the establishment of the state, and efforts were mobilized for building her infrastructure. The work of Bialik and his friends was confined to textbooks, awaiting renewal.

Questions of identity in Israeli society produced a dichotomy. During the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, one was defined as either an Israeli or a Jew. The “Israeli” was secular and Hebrew-speaking, a fighter with a “gentile” appearance—like Paul Newman in the film, *Exodus*. The “Jew” was weak and somewhat ridiculous, a throwback from the shtetl who kept the commandments and lived in the State of Israel as a minority faithful to the treasures of the past and responsible for religious ministrations.

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THE TIME FOR CHANGE—THE ISRAELI PUBLIC SPACE IS READY FOR HEBREW CULTURE

Cracks in the Israeli–Jew dichotomy began to show around the time of the Yom Kippur War (1973) when defeated Israeli arrogance led to accountability and soul-searching. It became evident that the Israeli culture of the time did not possess the depth required to deal with complex questions of identity. It was no longer possible to deny the Jewish past.

In the 1980s, with the foresight and help of the UJA-Federation of New York, Elul Beit Midrash (House of Study) was founded, where, for the first time, secular Israeli Jews participated in Torah study for its own sake (*Torah Lishmah*). At Elul, the Torah was recognized as belonging to all Jews, regardless of their affiliation, and women and men studied together. The Hebrew bookcase went through a change. The Torah library of Mishnah and Talmud tractates began to be complemented by the study of Shay Agnon and Y. H. Brenner, of poetry, philosophy, and art. Renewal of the library, unique to Elul at the time, later became widely acceptable even in advanced Orthodox yeshivot.

THE LAST DECADE—FROM ORIGINS TO ORIGINALITY

The innovation of the Elul Beit Midrash has evolved, during the past ten years, into a revolution in Torah study. About 100 Beit Midrash study centers now operate throughout Israel run by some 20 organizations affiliated with the Israeli Beit Midrash Network. This revolution has created a cultural movement reconnecting Israelis to their past and to the great books that nourish their culture. Those embracing it intend, by means of study, to experience an original lifestyle loyal to the past, serving the present, and building the future.

These centers of learning and culture do not give in to the accepted Israeli dichotomy. They are not “or–or.” They are not “Orthodox” or “secular,” they are open to women and men, and they accept belief and denial as part of the human process.

In the last decade, the public space has benefited from the fruits of this revival. A new rabbinical role has evolved—shapers of culture, according to Bialik’s vision, are reformulating Israeli secular Judaism through the connection of the great books to contemporary creative work. The words of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) and the 11th-century Hebrew poet Ibn Gvirol are being set to music by leading musicians and are being heard in the public space. Television scriptwriters and novelists are studying talmudic legend and using it as creative material. Batei Midrash for creative artists are directing their curricula toward training and enriching the people who are shaping and fine-tuning Israeli culture.

The Hebrew cultural renaissance is happening now, in the seventh decade of the state, which, in her maturity is being rejuvenated with the radiance of youth. We are now filling the void that resulted from 50 years of an educational policy limiting Jewish knowledge to the Bible alone, disconnected from the volumes of rabbinical literature such as the Mishnah, Talmud, Kabbalah, and Chassidism, which were considered as “belonging to the shtetl” and not compatible with the desired model of the “new Jew” in the Land of Israel. Today, we understand that all the layers of Jewish creativity are vital to us. One who is ignorant of the past is incapable of creating one’s future.

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NEW YORK AND OTHER COMMUNITIES AS PARTNERS AND ENABLERS

The New York community recognized and encouraged, both spiritually and financially, the evolution of contemporary Hebrew culture, thereby having a significant influence both on the Israeli public space and on its own Jewish scene. Jewish cultural institutions in New York have been natural partners in helping nurture the seeds of Jewish revival through study and cultural creation, including events such as the Alma Tikkun Leil Shavuot at the JCC of Manhattan, 92nd Street Y, and the Bronfman Center at NYU; Hebrew culture study sessions given in Hebrew at the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning in collaboration with Alma NY; and LABA: The National Laboratory for New Jewish Culture. LABA seeks to transform the Jewish cultural landscape by placing artists at the center of communal institutions as leaders, innovators, role models, and sources of inspiration. This joint program brings together artists from Alma in Tel Aviv and LABA in Manhattan through online dialogue, an exhibition of artwork on the theme of the body inspired by Beit Midrash study, and a collaborative catalogue.

While UJA-Federation of New York continues to focus on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, other federations could assist in the development of similar endeavors in other locations all over Israel and the United States. Such mutual partnership is of great value as it brings philanthropy to a different phase of joint benefit in which each side contributes its experience, professionalism, and momentum.