

WHY HEBREW IS FUNDAMENTAL TO JEWISH EDUCATION

Linguistics and Longevity: The Interdependence of Language, Heritage, and Nationalism

ALVIN I. SCHIFF, PH.D.

Irving I. Stone Distinguished Professor of Education, Azrieli Graduate School, Yeshiva University

The Hebrew language serves both as a unique expression of the Jewish heritage and a key instrument of the survival of the Jewish people. The mystique of Hebrew lies in its uniformity and constancy despite being spoken by Jews throughout the world and its multifaceted character—its use in the synagogue, the home, the arts, business, and in everyday life.

According to Douglas H. Whalen, Senior Scientist at Haskens Laboratories, Yale University, there are some 6,000 languages spoken today. Half of them are expected to vanish within the next century because of the influence of more common languages such as English, Chinese, and Spanish. In Australia, only ten people can speak Jingulu, an aboriginal language. In Alaska, there are only three households in which the native tongue Kuskokwim still prevails. World-wide, Whalen noted, some 100 languages have just one native speaker (Whalen, 1988).

In addition, some modern languages bear little resemblance to the ancient languages from which they developed. For example, modern Greek speakers cannot understand Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey* unless they have special training in classical Greek. Hindustani is hardly similar to Sanskrit, its progenitor. And modern Chinese speakers cannot read Confucius with understanding unless they have special schooling in the subject.

Therefore, the continuity of Hebrew, one

of mankind's oldest languages and the oldest continuous language (Aron & Zeldin, 1996) raises the question: In the face of 2,000 years of dispersion, how did Hebrew in modern times emerge as an *altneusprache* (an old-new language) that is currently the vernacular of some 5,000,000 Jews and 1,000,000 non-Jews in Israel, the spoken language of another million Jews in the Diaspora, and the language of prayer and learning of another 4,000,000 Jews world-wide?

The miracle of the continuity and revival of Hebrew as a living language has impressed people speaking endangered "minor" languages such as Basque, Irish, and Welsh. Linguistic delegations from Spain, Ireland, and Scotland have visited Israel to learn about the various methods of language instruction, particularly the *Ulpan*, the study institute for adults that stresses oral comprehension, conversation, and daily terminology, and the *ivrit b'ivrit* approach—the method of teaching other subjects in the Hebrew language. Both of these instructional techniques helped bring about the renaissance of Hebrew.

Hebrew was never a dead language in the accepted sense of the term. Yet, it was revived. It never ceased to be a medium of religious expression for the Jewish people. Yet, it was reborn. This is its mystique, the bipolar power of the Hebrew language. It is the vehicle of a sacred past, of eternal Jewish

In dedicating this essay to Bernard Reisman, I recall the numerous meetings of the Hornstein Professional Advisory Committee under my chairmanship when the matter of Hebrew language was discussed. Bernie was always enthusiastically supportive of efforts to enhance the Hebrew-language background of the Hornstein students, particularly of those in the education concentration. In our discussions we underscored the importance of the knowledge of Hebrew for Jewish text study, for synagogue involvement, and for a stronger relationship with the State of Israel.

values. At the same time, it is a major expression of contemporary Jewish vitality.

Even though it was not used or was rarely used as a vernacular in the lands of Jewish dispersion since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago, it was employed regularly during the last two millennia by the vast majority of Jews wherever they resided as a language of prayer, study, and ritual observance. And although it did not die, it was revived during the last century as a common, everyday spoken language. This revival in Palestine/Israel bordered on the miraculous, since the immigrants who came to Israel from dozens of countries throughout the world and comprised the vast majority of the Jewish population brought with them such a large variety of linguistic baggage.

Hebrew, as an ancient language, is well over 3,500 years old. Although there are Canaanite, Akkadian, Amorite, and Egyptian linguistic antecedents that are considered by some as pre-biblical forms of the language we now know as Hebrew, the Bible is the first corpus of texts written in this medium. It was a fully fashioned literary vehicle.

In biblical times, Hebrew was the common language of the various peoples living in the Mideast area called Canaan, such as the Moabites, the Amorites, and the Edomites. It is for this reason that Hebrew was known in the Bible as *Sefat Cana'an*, the language of *Cana'an* (Isaiah 19:18; Nachmanides' commentary on Genesis 45:12).

Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, according to Jewish rabbinic tradition, spoke in the language of the Bible. This notion is reinforced in the Midrash (a collection of commentaries and interpretations on the Bible) that notes that Abraham was descended from Ever, the great-grandson of Noah, who spoke *Ivrit* or Hebrew, the language of Ever (*Midrash Rabbah Genesis* 18:14). To be sure, the root letters of *Ivrit* and *Ever* are the same. In medieval and contemporary times, Hebrew was regarded by some scholars, including leading Christian scholars in Europe, to be Adam's original tongue, the *prima*

lingua, the prime or first language of the human race (Goldman, 1993; Simpson, 1979).

Hebrew continued to be the language of Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, when they were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years. The *Midrash* observes that the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt as a Hebrew nation because, among other things, "they did not change their language" (*Midrash Leviticus* 32:5). They stubbornly retained their linguistic identity. Hebrew was the common everyday language of the Israelite masses from the time they conquered the Land of Canaan until the end of the First Commonwealth with the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

When the Jews returned to their homeland from Babylonia some 100 years later, Hebrew was revived, but not without difficulty. Nehemiah, the leader of the returnees, had to employ strong measures to guarantee the continued use of Hebrew for Bible study, for public reading of the Bible, and for daily conversation. He notes, "Half of the children [of the returning exiles] spoke *Ashdodit* (the language of *Ashdod*) and did not know how to speak *Yehudit* (Hebrew)" (Nehemiah 13:24). Nehemiah "waged the first war in Jewish history against the detractors of the Hebrew language" (Federbursh, 1967) because he realized that Hebrew was a *conditio sine qua non* for the survival of the Jewish people, for its spiritual continuity, and for the re-establishment of the Jewish nation in the Land of Israel.

Similar challenges regarding the use of Hebrew by the Jewish people were faced in subsequent periods of Jewish history. During the days of Yehudah Ha-nasi, Judah the Prince, patriarch of Judea and redactor of the *Mishnah*—the first part of the *Talmud*, the body of early Jewish civil and religious law—in 200 CE Hebrew was in danger of disappearing as a national language and being replaced by Aramaic, both as a vernacular and as a means of literary expression. Rabbi Judah warned the Jewish people about the neglect of Hebrew. He meticulously spoke Hebrew at home. The *Talmud* relates that even his maidservant had such a command of

Hebrew that his students learned from her Hebrew words and terms that they had either forgotten or had never known (*Rosh Hashanah* 26; *Megillah* 18).

Rabbi Meir, a leading scholar of the second century who made major contributions to the development of the Oral Law, also tried to stem the tide of the Aramaic language. He rules, "When a child begins to speak, his father should speak Hebrew to him and teach him Torah (in the original Hebrew text); and if the father fails to speak to him in the Holy Tongue and does not teach him Torah, it is as if he buries him" (*Sifrei, Deuteronomy* 11:19).

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries in North Africa and in the Spanish peninsula, Arabic took root in a large segment of the Jewish population as the language of literary and philosophical writing while Aramaic, used in Babylonia for almost a millennium, continued to serve as the language of Talmudic study and discourse. Twelfth-century Maimonides, the most illustrious figure in the post-Talmudic era—an outstanding rabbinic authority, rationalist, philosopher, and royal physician—wrote many of his works in Arabic to accommodate the Jewish masses, many of whom did not know Hebrew. However, Maimonides became convinced that Judaic literature should be written and studied solely in Hebrew. Toward this end, he refused to translate his fourteen-volume *magnum opus*—*Mishneh Torah*, the massive codification of Jewish law—from Hebrew into Arabic. And, it seems he later regretted having done most of his writing in Arabic. Moreover, he stressed that the study of Hebrew was a religious obligation of the highest order (Haramati, 1992).

Following in Maimonides' footsteps were many religious leaders who vigorously combated efforts to de-Hebraize Jewish life, to develop a Judaism in translation, to use the languages of the lands of Jewish residence as the vehicles of Bible study and communion with the Almighty. These leaders helped transform Hebrew into a religious-national value of Jewish life in exile. As such Hebrew became the ethnic-national ingredient ingrained in the consciousness of the Jewish

people, a sustaining feature of a landless nation.

For the disappearance of the Jewish community of Alexandria, a vibrant center of Jewish life several hundred thousand strong at the turn of the first century, was ever in their minds. The basis for Alexandrian Jewish culture was the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Bible. The Jews of Alexandria became fully Hellenized as they studied the Bible and other Judaic sources in Greek translation. Philo, the leading Jewish philosopher of the first century CE in Alexandria, studied, wrote, and taught in Greek. It is doubtful whether he had a working knowledge of Hebrew.

And what happened to this formidable Jewish community? Its decline began with the process of Hellenization and de-Hebraization. Several centuries later, after other unfortunate events, the Jewish remnants of Alexandria were absorbed into Islamic culture.

One example of the strong advocacy of the use of Hebrew language and Hebrew language instruction is this statement made at the end of the nineteenth century by Rabbi Baruch Epstein (quoted in Federbush, 1967), Russian Talmudic scholar and biblical exegete.

Whoever has a hand and heart of faith, whose spirit and soul are faithful to his people, his religion, and his language, and wants to build a loyal household in Israel, should try hard to ensure that his sons and daughters, from the time they are being nursed by their mothers, hear Hebrew spoken and are encouraged to emote in Hebrew. After that, the parents will be able to implant in their hearts feelings of pure faith. In all their daily activities, including their play, from the time they wake up until they go to sleep, children should speak Hebrew with their parents and among themselves. And their sacred language will become their mother tongue.

In viewing Jewish history over the last two millennia, one observes a unique linguistic phenomenon among the Jewish people. The

Talmud notes that the Jews were trilingual: They had an internal language, an external language, and a sacred language (*Baba Kama* 83). Toward the end of the Second Commonwealth, in the first century BCE their internal language was an Aramaic-Syrian dialect, which served as their vernacular. Greek was their external language, which they used in their relations with gentiles; Hebrew was their sacred language for religious and national purposes. In the Middle Ages and contemporary times, for example, the internal language of Jews in the Spanish peninsula was *Judezmo*, a Spanish-Jewish dialect. Italian or Spanish was their external language, and Hebrew the language of their religious study, prayer, and ritual observance.

In Eastern Europe, Yiddish, a German-Jewish language, was their internal language and, depending upon where they resided, either Polish, Russian or Hungarian, and the like, was their external language; Hebrew was their sacred tongue. Using Hebrew as their sacred language meant that they communicated in the holy tongue thrice daily with their Maker. This is why an historian of the Hebrew language observed, "The Hebrew people never spoke any language as a religious nation other than Hebrew" (Federbush, 1967).

In the Talmud, there is an interesting disputation regarding the recitation of the *Shema*, the holiest of Jewish prayers, between Judah the Prince and the sages of the Talmud. Judah held that the *Shema* must be recited in Hebrew only. The sages opined that it could be recited in any language, if the person praying does not understand Hebrew (*Berakhot* 13; *Satah* 32). Most Jews did not understand Hebrew in Judah's time.

The *halakhah* (the authoritative Jewish law) was decided according to the opinion of the sages. This brings us to an intriguing socio-historical-religious reality of diaspora Jewish life during the last two millennia, eloquently described by Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum, the passionate spokesman for religious Zionism in Europe who was martyred during the Holocaust. Nissenbaum (1926) expressed his amazement regarding the domi-

nance of Hebrew in Jewish religious life despite the talmudic allowance to use *any* language in reciting the *Shema* and in the performance of *mitzvot*—religious deeds. He wrote (and I translate from his original Hebrew source),

We can imagine what would have happened had the Jews behaved regarding the use of Hebrew only according to the *halakhah*, which permits the use of "any language" in the synagogue and home, and would have used "any language" for reading the *Shema*, for daily prayer, for reciting the prayers for the sanctification of the Sabbath and Festivals, the blessings on the partaking of food and other blessings. If that happened, there would be no trace of Hebrew in our lives, not even in our religious lives.

But, the people with its national feelings had no desire to use the *halakhic* permission granted by the scholars of the Jewish religion at a time when the religious feelings of these scholars superseded their national feelings. The Jewish people took extreme care to recite all these aforementioned things in the Hebrew language. And, thus, the national language of the Jewish people was dominant in the synagogue; and, more significantly, it was the tongue of every Jewish home. The Hebrew mother recited the first morning prayer, *modeh ani*, in Hebrew with her children. The sound of Hebrew resounded at the meal table as all the people who ate recited the appropriate blessings before the meal and grace after the meal in Hebrew. It was in Hebrew that every Jew recited his bedtime prayers as he closed his eyes. It was in Hebrew that he welcomed the Sabbath and festivals with *Kiddush* and bade them farewell with *havdalah*, the special ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath. It was the sound of Hebrew in every home and synagogue and street that sanctified the secular life of the Jew. This was not possible by the use of "any language" for religious purposes.

What a powerful statement about the will of a people entrenched in their heritage, who took care that all life-cycle events were conducted in Hebrew!

Contributing significantly to the survival of Hebrew as a living language was the use of written Hebrew as a means of communication. A prime use of Hebrew during the medieval and contemporary periods was in the Responsa, lengthy answers by rabbinic authorities about matters of Jewish life. Hebrew was used to inform and guide the Jewish community regarding Jewish religious and ethical practices. An example of this kind of writing is the nineteenth-century bestseller, *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh*, a concise summary of the authoritative Ashkenazic code of Judaic law and custom.

Communication between the leaders of the various Jewish communities was almost always in Hebrew. In 1903 the leaders of the Jewish community of Safi, Morocco, wrote in Hebrew to Theodore Herzl after receiving from him informational materials on Zionism in the German language. In their letter to Herzl, the Jews of Safi requested that the "honorable prince" communicate with them about Zionism in Hebrew. They also asked that he send them the Hebrew translation of *Judenstaat*, his treatise on the establishment of a Jewish State, and make available the Hebrew rendition of other books and materials relevant to the Zionist idea.

Letter writing between ordinary Jews was often done via the Holy Tongue, and Jewish communal records were always kept in Hebrew. Communal regulations and announcements were promulgated primarily in Hebrew. Business documents between Jews were often written in Hebrew, and merchants frequently kept their private business records in Hebrew. Invitations to weddings and other family events were issued in Hebrew, and wills were written in the Holy Tongue as were inscriptions on gravestones. This wide variety of Hebrew language usage helped guarantee Hebrew's survival.

The development of Hebrew as a modern vernacular corresponds, in a practical way, to the development of the modern Jewish State. Ahad Ha'am, the brilliant Hebraist, secular Jewish philosopher, and Zionist leader, saw the natural indispensable linkage between

these two developments. He stressed the vital integrative relationships between the revival of Hebrew, its continuance as the Jewish ethnic language, and the renaissance of Jewish nationhood in Palestine. This relationship was at the heart of his theory of the Jewish State as the *merkaz ruhani*, the spiritual cultural center, for Jewish life everywhere.

In his seminal essay, "Imitation and Assimilation," Ahad Ha'am (1893) posits that a minority culture in Western society must willfully emulate the majority culture. However, there are two kinds of imitation, writes Ahad Ha'am—absorptive imitation and competitive imitation—and each has vastly different consequences. Absorptive imitation leads to assimilation. The family of Moses Mendelssohn, a founder of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) movement and the Reform movement, believed in the use of German as the language of study and prayer for the German Jewish masses. His family fell prey to absorptive assimilation. Four of his six sons intermarried, as did the children of his other sons.

Imitation will inevitably lead to total assimilation unless the minority culture learns to compete with the majority. For Jews, that competition, Ahad Ha'am believed, was the daily use of its national language, which served as a barrier to assimilation. Moreover, the sacred literacy of the Jews "seemed to balance the pull toward the majority language" (Spolsky & Cooper, 1991).

Ahad Ha'am viewed the role of Hebrew as serving both as a unique expression of the Judaic heritage and as a key instrument of the creative survival of the Jewish people. Every nation, he noted, participates in the world scene in a special way via its national language. The Jewish people's "national stock" lies in the Hebrew language that is the link between the dispersed Jewish communities of the Diaspora and the link between generations of Jews.

To be a national language, Ahad Ha'am insisted, its usage as a mother tongue or vernacular is not sufficient. The national

language must incorporate the spiritual and cultural wealth of the nation and its national ideals. As such, the combination of Jewish religion, literature, and language has been the Jewish people's portable property after the exile began with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. And when the Holy Land would become once again the physical center of the Jewish people, Ahad Ha'am (1893) opined, the Hebrew language would be the bridge between the Land and the Diaspora.

Although the initial steps toward the revival of Hebrew in modern times took place in Europe, its full-blown development occurred in the Jewish homeland. The revival of Hebrew as a modern spoken language began in Palestine in the later decades of the nineteenth century with the arrival from Eastern Europe of Zionist pioneers, chief among them Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

The pioneers were determined to revive ancient Hebrew and make it the common language of the new State about which they dreamt and for which they devoted their lives. According to most accounts, Ben Yehuda largely was responsible for the near-miracle of making Hebrew the national language of Palestine (now Israel) spoken by the masses (St. John, 1972). He believed fervently that a Jewish rebirth in Palestine was not possible without the revival of Hebrew. For him, spoken Hebrew, as the soul of a living people, was the essence of Jewish renaissance. Without a language capable of expressing all the nuances of life, both ancient and modern, the rebirth of the Jewish people in its land would be meaningless.

Ben Yehuda insisted on using Hebrew in his home and raising his children speaking the language. While his neighbors conversed in the language of their former countries of residence or in Yiddish or Ladino, Ben Yehuda did not allow any language other than Hebrew to be spoken in his home. Thus began the process of nativization and normalization of Hebrew in modern times (Glinert, 1991; Haramati, 1980). Modern Hebrew was born in Palestine as Ben Yehuda removed the fear of linguistic innovation from the hearts of many religious Jews—the bulk of religious

Jews in Jerusalem continued to restrict the use of Hebrew to sacred activities—and provided for secular Zionists a channel for their ethnic feelings and expression. Moreover, he created many new words based on the Bible and Talmud and even developed some new words with Arabic roots. To propagate the use of these new words he disseminated them in the newspaper he published. Other lovers of Hebrew helped ensure that the ancient tongue of the Prophets would once again become the vernacular. Thus, the revival of Hebrew was part of a complex historical, social, psychological, and linguistic process. In effect, the revitalization took place in the new Zionist settlements through people who were inspired by the idea of ethnic and cultural Jewish rebirth, particularly through the arduous efforts of enthusiastic persistent teachers (Harshav, 1993). And the pupils then became the Hebrew instructors of their parents.

Ben Yehuda and his associates and followers engaged in *milhemet ha-safah*, a language war, between 1912 and 1914, fighting for a place for Hebrew in Palestine along with other languages and particularly for Hebrew as the language of instruction in the newly founded Technion in Haifa. They established an educational system in which Hebrew, with almost no exceptions, became the only language used. To accomplish this in the *yishuv* meant transforming a language used only for special purposes—prayer and study—to a single vernacular for all the communication needs of this varied population (Spiegel, 1962). And during the era of the British Mandate (1918–1948), Hebrew was recognized as an official language of Palestine along with English and Arabic.

In retrospect, the mystique of Hebrew is its constancy—its uniformity. As Jews resided in countries all over the globe, their ancestral language was influenced in different times and places by Aramaic, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Polish, and Russian languages. This led to regional differences in Hebrew language usage. Nevertheless, Hebrew maintained a uniformity throughout; it retained its ancient structure and char-

acter. The essential uniformity of the Hebrew language in its various stages of development prompted the author of the essay on Hebrew in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* to make the bold claim that twentieth-century intelligent Hebrew speakers with a high-school background are able to read and understand literature written in Hebrew from the earliest times to the most modern (Orman, 1972). And conversely, according to Charles Berlitz (1982), the prominent American language educator, "If the prophets who compiled the books of the Old Testament could return to present-day Israel, they would still be able to read the Israeli daily press." Both these claims might be somewhat exaggerated. However, they underscore the fact that the changes that took place over time in vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and pronunciation did not transform the fundamental nature of Hebrew.

Currently, Hebrew is used in different ways for different purposes by different people. Many secularists see Hebrew primarily as a vehicle of modern communication and modern literature. In contrast, most ultra-Orthodox Jews, a small minority in Israel, consider Hebrew to be a holy tongue to be used solely for Judaic learning and prayer.

From an historical, sociolinguistic perspective, the Hebrew language is a multifaceted linguistic vehicle of Jewish life from earliest times until the present. Hebrew, in all its usages, contributed significantly to Jewish survival throughout the ages. Therefore, one cannot appreciate the value of Hebrew via any single dimension of the language. Hebrew must be considered in all its forms and variety of usages, including biblical Hebrew, mishnaic Hebrew, rabbinic Hebrew, liturgical Hebrew, modern Hebrew, and Hebrew terminology associated with Judaic literacy and used in the Jewish internal languages such as Ladino and Yiddish. This means considering the use of Hebrew in the synagogue, educational settings, the home, business, the arts, culture, professions, and the street. Hebrew's multidimensionality is its distinctiveness as a survival mechanism. Indeed, it demonstrates clearly that the survival of Hebrew as a Holy Tongue, the survival of the Jewish

people in its homeland and in the Diaspora, and the continuity of Jewish nationalism are interdependent.

REFERENCES

- Ahad Ha'am. (1893). *Hikkui Ve'hitbol'lut*. In *Kol Kitvei Ahad Ha'am*. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House.
- Aron, Isa, & Zeldin, Michael. (1996). Change in Jewish education: Prescriptions and paradoxes. *Agenda*, 7, 19-26.
- Berlitz, Charles. (1982). *Native tongues*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap.
- Federbush, Simon. (1967). *Halashon Ha'Ivrit B'Yisrael V'Va-amim*. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook.
- Glinert, Lewis. (1991). The "back to the future" syndrome in language planning: The case of modern Hebrew. In David Marshall, ed., *Language planning*. Amsterdam: John Ben-jamin.
- Goldman, Shalom. (1993). *Hebrew and Bible in America—The First Two Centuries*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press and Dartmouth College.
- Haramati, Shlomo. (1992). *Ivrit Hayah B'mrutzat Hadorot*. Jerusalem: Massada.
- Haramati, Shlomo. (1980). *Reishit Hahimukh Ha'Ivri Ba'Aretz U'trumato L'Hahayat Halashon*. Jerusalem: Massada.
- Harshav, Binyamin. (1993). *Language in the time of revolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Nissenbaum, Yitzhak. (1926). *Imrei Drush*. Warsaw: Weiser.
- Orman, Uzi. (1972). Hebrew grammar. In C. Roth and G. Wigoder, ed., *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 8. Jerusalem: Keter.
- Simpson, J.W. (1979). *A first course in linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Spiegel, Shalom. (1962). *Hebrew reborn*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- Spolsky, Bernard, & Cooper, Robert. (1991). *The languages of Jerusalem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- St. John, Robert. (1972). *Tongue of the prophets*. North Hollywood, CA: Wilshire Book Co.
- Whalen, Douglas H. (1988, March). *New York Times Magazine*.