1 *Modern Hebrew Language and Literature*

Jewish immigrants who approached the coast of Palestine by sea were deeply moved by their first glimpse of the legendary land.

The land of Israel! Can you see it … ?

Behind the dark mist above the mountains a bright red light began to rise and paint the sky a delicate purple that filled the air with soft pale light, as in a dream. There was an awesome stillness, no wind, no waves. A moment later the mountain tops caught fire, great big glowing embers that sent sparks into the heavens. And then the sun burst out of the depth with a mighty force and great speed, young, vigorous, burning with deep, pure, blinding brilliance. Dark reddish clouds floated above and then vanished one by one like melting snow. The sky cleared, and the air radiated silently, steeped in the soft, sweet warmth of dawn. The small group of people on the ship's deck stood as if spellbound. Mr Cederbaum was the only one who broke the silence.

- But this is our sun! he called out with excitement and awe at the bright sun … - Our sun, the sun of our fathers, the sun of the land of Israel, our land, the sun that had shone here in the days of Abraham! Our sun has risen!

This is an excerpt from a 1938 novel, *The Days of the Messiah*, which Y. D. Berkowitz wrote in a vibrant Hebrew that could hardly have been imagined a few decades earlier. Hebrew never died, but for almost two millennia it was a religious language confined to books of prayer and legal texts. Few people used it outside of that context – the poetic tradition of Spanish Jews in the Middle Ages was a brilliant exception – and fewer still spoke it. And so the Zionist decision to return to Hebrew was neither obvious nor predetermined. Theodor Herzl, for instance, believed that the Hebrew language was antiquated and unfit for modern national life. "Who among us knows Hebrew well enough

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to ask for a train ticket in that language?" he famously quipped.[1] He later changed his mind and even tried to learn Hebrew, though he remained uncommitted to the future of Hebrew and thought people should decide for themselves which would be the "precious homeland of their thoughts," as he put it.[2]

At the same time, the role of Hebrew in the Zionist revolution was probably a historical imperative. First, because nationalism was preoccupied with origin and heritage. Second, because the cultural genealogy of Jews was tied to the Hebrew language as a proof and as a symbol of their antiquity. But the process wasn't simple and took more than a century.

Most historians locate the beginning of modern Israeli Hebrew in the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskala, of the nineteenth century and the new uses it found for Hebrew. A neat idea, but not necessarily accurate. The Modern Hebrew of the Haskala is different from Israeli Hebrew and developed in response to a specific set of circumstances. Jewish nationalism was not one of them. In fact, the opposite was true. Paradoxically, the modern chapter in the history of Hebrew began as a way to ease the integration of Jews into non-Jewish society in order to enable them to eventually forget about Hebrew and other identifying markers that set them apart from non-Jews. At the same time, the linguistic creativity of Haskala writers and the modern Hebrew literature they composed was an important evolutionary stage in the history of contemporary Hebrew, even if it was unintended, and even if we can only say so in retrospect.

The Haskala was a belated Jewish Age of Reason that advocated liberty, tolerance, religious and political freedom, and a belief in scientific progress, ideas which allowed Jews to integrate into European society for the first time since the Roman era. And since most Jews had until then lived in separate communities of faith, the work of the first *maskilim*, the proponents of Haskala, focused on eliminating the barriers that separated Jews from non-Jews.

[1] The quip appears in Herzl's political pamphlet: Theodor Herzl, *Der Judenstaat*, 1896, available at Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org/files/25282/25282-h/25282-h.htm.

[2] Shimon A. Shur. "The Complete Return to Hebrew and the Israeli-Zionist Nation-Building: A Bibliographical Essay," *Jewish Studies* (מדעי היהדות) 36 (1996): 73–107, available at www.jstor.org/stable/23381998, p. 75.

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Language was the biggest of those barriers, for while Jews had lived outside the Land of Israel since antiquity – they had settled in Babylon(ia) in the sixth century BCE and in Athens in the third – they tended to develop separate Jewish languages. In Europe it was Ladino and Yiddish. Both languages were based on local idioms – Ladino on Spanish, Yiddish on German – but they were written in the Hebrew alphabet. It was a peculiar practice, perhaps, that promoted communal cohesion amongst Jews, who tended to be geographically dispersed. But it also set Jews apart. Despite living side by side in many towns throughout the Pale of Settlement, a swath that stretched across Europe from the Baltic to the Black Sea, Jews and non-Jews barely communicated. "Ivan!" shouts the rabbi in Bialik's story "The Short Friday," moments before his drunk sled driver hurls the two of them into a snowbank. The learned rabbi has lived among Russian speakers his entire life, but knows only one word in that language, the name of his Gentile driver.

Language, then, almost immediately became one of the most urgent matters for *maskilim*. Until the end of the nineteenth century literacy levels among Jews were relatively high, particularly among Jewish men, who had some form of religious education. But like the rabbi in Bialik's short story, Jewish literacy was limited almost exclusively to Jewish languages: Hebrew for rituals and religious study, and several vernaculars such as Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic for everyday use.

Maskilim who wanted to spread their ideas among their coreligionists were limited to the Jewish languages they knew. In Germany, where the Haskala began, it was either Yiddish or Hebrew. Yiddish was the most obvious choice because Hebrew was considered an elevated language of religion and law. Yiddish, on the other hand, was the language of everyday life and understood by all, including women, who were less proficient than men in Hebrew because they were barred from religious education. The *maskilim* chose to write in Hebrew – Biblical Hebrew, to be exact – the old and stylized language of the Bible. It was an odd choice.

Consider one of the first major projects of the Haskala, Moses Mendelssohn's *Bi'ur*, his translation of the Five Books of Moses from Hebrew into German, using Hebrew letters. Mendelssohn (1729–1786) was a pioneering *maskil*, who wanted to teach German to his fellow Jews so he could share the ideas of Enlightenment with them. Still, his choice of alphabet seems counterintuitive. If his goal was to teach Jews a new language that would give them access to the world around them, why use letters that represented their isolation? There were two

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good reasons for it. The first was the intimacy of Hebrew, which lent a familiar context to Mendelssohn's novel ideas and constructed a friendly Hebrew bridge on the way to enlightenment. The second was to appease a rabbinic establishment that was suspicious of the Enlightenment.[3]

Using the traditional layout of Rabbinic commentaries, Mendelssohn placed the original Hebrew text in the middle of the page and inserted the translation into Hebrew-German on the side:

Translation into German using Hebrew letters with Yiddish orthography (ע for 'e' and א for 'o' or 'a'):	Leviticus 27:34:
(לד) דיזע זינד דיא גבאטי, וועלכי דר עוויגי אם בערג סיני דעם משה פיר דיא קינדר ישראלש אויפגטראגן:	(לד) אֵלֶּה הַמִּצְוֹת אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהַר סִינָי:

Transliterated into standard German, the text reads, "Diese sind die gebote, welche der Ewige am berg Sinai dem Moshe für die kinder Israels aufgetragen," or in English, "These are the commands that the Eternal commanded Moses for the Children of Israel on Mount Sinai."

The choice of Hebrew over Yiddish was also emotional. Hebrew was the language of Jewish origins, Jewish history, and a Jewish identity that spanned time and space. For many *maskilim*, however, Yiddish was the language of a minority, of subjugation, a language that stood for an antiquated way of life. Even Mendelssohn, a sophisticated linguist, thought Yiddish too plain to express the high ideas of the Enlightenment. *Maskilim* spoke of Yiddish as a jargon, an impure idiom that was unfit for refined cultural expression. It was a resentment that transferred to Zionism later.

The Hebrew of the Jewish Enlightenment

But if the choice was between Hebrew and Yiddish, why choose the antiquated language of the Hebrew Bible? Why not choose a more accessible idiom, such as Rabbinic Hebrew? Jews who knew some Hebrew were more familiar with its medieval varieties used in the Talmud, the most important legal codex in Judaism. Both versions of the Talmud, the Palestinian and the Babylonian, were composed in late

[3] Joshua A. Fishman, ed., *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, Brill, 1985.

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antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and their Hebrew was influenced by Aramaic and other languages. But that was precisely the problem. *Maskilim* thought of Rabbinic Hebrew as a contaminated language that, like Yiddish, reflected an obsolete way of life.

As the *maskilim* saw it, Biblical Hebrew was both pure and ancient, and as such it accomplished two goals. It cleansed Jewish life of religious obscurantism, and it reminded Jews of past glories that even non-Jews acknowledged and respected. And it was timely too. The Haskala unfolded one hundred years after the Age of Reason, during the rise of nationalism. Ancient Hebrew emphasized the antiquity of the Jews just when other nations in Europe were scrambling to establish their own pedigrees.

The reference to the biblical kingdoms of Judea and Israel was not part of a political program to restore Jewish independence. Not yet. That would come later, with Zionism. Biblical Hebrew was a sentimental device. It gave Jews a greater sense of self-worth, and elevated them in the eyes of others. The idea was to look beyond the reduced Jewish present to a future that was inspired by a distinguished past, a vision that would allow Jews to enter non-Jewish society as equals.

In 1853 Abraham Mapu (1808–1867) captured these sentiments in his runaway bestselling novel *The Love of Zion* (אהבת ציון), a love story set in biblical times and written in Biblical Hebrew throughout. Historical novels are always about the present, not the past, and so the love story and its political context in the novel provide important clues to its agenda. The pastoral romance teaches about personal fulfillment through love; the religious reforms of King Josiah resonate with the reformative program of the Haskala. Mapu worked on the novel for nearly twenty years and used a literary technique called *shibutz* in Hebrew, roughly translated as "mosaics." He collected words, phrases, and names from the Hebrew Bible and rearranged them to create an entirely new text, a secular work of art that used a sacred language. The technique itself was not uncommon, in Hebrew as in other languages, though usually for shorter works such as letters or poetry. Mapu used it to write an entire novel. It was remarkable and unprecedented, a modern story that recalled the illustrious Jewish past and gave Jewish readers a sense of personal and communal agency.

Because Mapu restricted himself to the language of the Hebrew Bible and cherry-picked dramatic elements from well-known stories, readers of the novel get an uncanny impression that they are reading

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the holy book. Here is the opening to the novel, which draws on the book of Job, the book of Kings, stories of the patriarchs, and the story of the prophet Samuel:

> איש היה בירושלים בימי אָחָז מלך יהודה ושמו יוֹרָם בן אֲבִיעֶזֶר, אלוף ביהודה ושר אלף, ויהי לו שדות וכרמים בכרמל ובשרון ועדרי צאן ובקר בבית לחם יהודה; ויהי לו כסף וזהב, היכלי שן וכל שכיות החמדה, ושתי נשים היו לו, שם האחת חַגִית בת עִירָא, ושם השנית נַעֲמָה. ויאהב יורם את נעמה מאד, כי יפת תואר היא. ותקנא בה חגית צרתה ותכעיסנה, כי לחגית היו שני בנים ולנעמה לא היה ולד.

In the days of Ahaz, king of Judea, there was a man in Jerusalem named Yoram ben Aviezer, a chieftain in Judea and captain of a thousand, he had fields and vineyards in Carmel and Sharon as well as sheep and cattle in Bethlehem of Judea, he also had silver and gold, ivory palaces, and lovely crafts, and he had two wives, one named Hagit daughter of Ira, the other named Na'ama. Yoram loved Na'ama very much for she was beautiful. Hagit, her rival, was jealous of her and tormented her, for she had two sons and Na'ama had no child.

The Love of Zion	Biblical Source[4]	English Translation
איש היה בירושלים	Job 1:1	There was a man [in the land of Uz]
בימי אָחָז מלך יהודה	Isa. 7:1	In the days of Ahaz … king of Judea
ושמו יוֹרָם	2 Sam. 10:8	His name was Yoram
בן אֲבִיעֶזֶר	Josh. 17:2	Aviezer
אלוף ביהודה	Gen. 36:15	Chieftain
ושר אלף	1 Sam. 18:13	A captain of a thousand
ויהי לו	Gen. 12:17	And he had
שדות וכרמים	1 Sam. 22:7	Fields and vineyards
בכרמל	Josh. 18:26	In Carmel
ובשרון	1 Chron. 27:29	In Sharon
ועדרי צאן ובקר	Gen. 12:16	Sheep and cattle
בבית לחם יהודה	Judg. 17:7	In Bethlehem of Judea

[4] Only the first occurrence of a word in the biblical text is noted in this table. The translation is based on a variety of sources.

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The Love of Zion	Biblical Source[4]	English Translation
ויהי לו כסף וזהב	Gen. 24:35	Silver and gold
היכלי שן	Ps. 45:9	Ivory palaces
שכיות החמדה	Isa. 2:16	Lovely crafts
ושתי נשים היו לו	1 Sam. 1:2	And he had two wives
שם האחת	Gen. 4:19	The name of the one
חַגִּית	1 Sam. 3:4	Hagit
בת עִירָא	2 Sam. 20:26	Ira
ושם השנית	Gen. 4:19	And the name of the other
נַעֲמָה	Gen. 4:22	Na'ama
ויאהב יורם את נעמה מאד	Gen. 29:18	And Yoram loved
כי יפת תואר היא	Gen. 29:17	Beautiful
ותקנא בה חגית	Gen. 30:1	Was jealous of
צרתה	1 Sam. 1:6	Her trouble
ותכעיסנה	1 Sam. 1:7	And would torment her
כי לחגית היו שני בנים ולנעמה לא היה ולד.	Gen. 11:30	Had no child

The book brought tears to the eyes of many a young man who read it in secret at night – the Hebrew of the book limited it almost exclusively to yeshiva students, who were not allowed to read such secular "trash." "I would wait until my parents turned the light off in their bedroom," remembered author Shlomo Tzemach, "shut the door to my room, turn the light on, and read Hebrew books my conservative parents disapproved of," among them, Mapu's *The Love of Zion*.[5] "My desire to speak Hebrew began after I secretly read *The Love of Zion*," wrote Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who longed to speak Hebrew "like Amnon and Tamar and the other young people I met on the pages of that book."[6]

The *maskilim* believed that modernity could provide Jews with a more comfortable place in the world. And if they wrote in Hebrew,

[5] Shlomo Tzemach, My Life Story (סיפור חיי), available at https://benyehuda.org/read/25934#fn:4.

[6] Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, "Changes, the Beginning of Hebrew Speech" (תולדות ותמורות, תחילת הדיבור העברי), Hebrew Academy website, Archival Collection, available at https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2020/08/26/לקט-תעודות/.

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the language would only be a temporary measure, a bridge to ease the crossing from the Jewish to the other side. "I was a young married man then, boarding with my wealthy in-laws in a small Russian town," wrote Micha Yosef Berdichevsky (1865–1921) in his short story "Across the River." "The town had two sides, an upper part of wealthy Gentiles and a lower and poorer part, where the Jews huddled." The protagonist is frustrated by these differences, which go beyond socioeconomics. "I am not sure what I feel or think, I only know I am confined here, I lack the space to think." And so, "one summer night, after evening prayers, I snuck out of the study house and headed for the bridge. I walked across it slowly … struck by the knowledge that I am going from a place of darkness to a place of light."[7]

In some ways the Haskala in Europe was a success; in others it was a failure. Enlightenment fulfilled its promise by helping Jews integrate into the modern world as individuals. But it failed to create an alternative communal framework for them. Modernization often led to complete assimilation. Consider this: four of Mendelssohn's six children converted to Christianity, and their offspring, including the composer Felix Mendelssohn, left the Jewish community completely. And although this failure continued to needle many *maskilim*, it set the scene for the next stage in the modern history of Hebrew, which focused on the language as an end in itself. The idea was first suggested by Peretz Smolenskin in 1868. "Other nations put up stone monuments, they build towers, and fight bloody wars to be remembered," he wrote in the inaugural issue of his journal, *The Dawn* (השחר):

> They look forward to that great day when they shall be restored to their land, and they never let up. Whereas we, who have neither monuments nor land, neither name nor remnant except our one and only record, the last testament that survived our destruction, the Hebrew language, we are ashamed of it and turn away from it. ... Those who turn away from Hebrew despise the Jewish people ... and betray their nation and its faith.

Smolenskin (1842–1885) and likeminded *maskilim* never specified exactly how Hebrew might bring more meaning into modern Jewish life, how the language could create a new communal framework. But they didn't have to. The idea was powerful because it relied on the

[7] Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, "Across the River" (מעבר לנהר), available at https://benyehuda.org/read/7645 (my translation).

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centrality of Hebrew in Jewish culture. "We write Hebrew," wrote Y. H. Brenner a bit later, "because we cannot help it, because only this flame sparks the divine in us."[8] Their stubborn work – in isolation, often unrewarded – created a new Jewish library – an alternative to the vast traditional library Jews had created over the millennia – that had the potential to inspire a new Jewish community if and when it came to life. When historians speak about the genealogy of modern Israeli Hebrew, they speak of this library as its foundation.

A Hebrew Revival?

Mordechai Zeev Feierberg (1874–1899) was one of the first Hebrew authors who gave the cultural agenda of Hebrew a distinctly political turn. Whither? he asked in his 1899 novella of that name; where should Jews go now that many avenues of acculturation have been closed off to them, primarily in Eastern Europe? Nahman, the tortured protagonist of the novel, thinks of his fellow Jews as "a miserable people, used to a life of slavery and scorn, confinement and dirt." But he has also noticed that they are beginning to wake up: "The accursed prisoner is breaking out of his cell." Where should this freed prisoner go? wonders Nahman, who comes up with a solution by the story's end. "I do believe," he urges, "that if the Jewish people truly has a purpose, [it should live up to it] by going to the East," to the Land of Israel, "not as an enemy of the East but as its loving brother." It will not be easy, he warns his listeners, but there is no doubt it shall come about. "I see it, though not now, I behold it, yet it is not near," he quotes the prophet Balaam, and ends his own prophecy with the call, "To the East! To the East!" (מזרחה).

Feierberg wrote those words at about the time Zionism appeared on the world stage. It was not a coincidence, except that Feierberg and other Hebrew writers focused on culture, not on diplomacy, and, naively perhaps, hoped that language would bring those changes about. Few writers summed this up as well as Shalom Jacob Abramovitch (1836–1917), better known by his penname, Mendele Moikher Sforim, Mendele the Book Seller. Abramovitch began his career as an unremarkable Hebrew writer in the 1850s. In the 1860s he switched to Yiddish, and became a celebrated writer. In the 1880s he took up Hebrew again, and became a founding father of modern Hebrew literature. His story is the story of Jewish modernity in Europe and the fortunes of Hebrew as part of it.

[8] Shur, "The Complete Return to Hebrew," pp. 77, 88.

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Early in his career Abramovitch wrote in a grand Biblical Hebrew that matched the lofty vision of the Haskala but limited his appeal. When he switched to Yiddish he extended his reach and spread the ideas of the Enlightenment further afield. But when anti-Jewish sentiments in Eastern Europe escalated toward the end of the nineteenth century, they challenged many of those ideas and drove Abramovitch back to Hebrew again. The return signaled a new stage in the Jewish struggle toward modernity, one that reconsidered some of the unfulfilled promises of the Haskala and looked for other ways to work them out.

In 1878 Abramovitch published a short novel in Yiddish, *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, a story about a lovable ignoramus named Benjamin, who plans an expedition in search of Jewish dragons and other fanciful creatures. If the story parodied traditional Jewish backwardness, it saluted curiosity, the desire to leave the narrow confines of the shtetl (a Jewish townlet in Eastern Europe) and learn about the world outside. When Abramovitch reissued the work in Hebrew in 1897, the emphasis of his critique shifted, and the joke was no longer on the Jews alone. Benjamin and his travel companion are kidnapped and forced to serve in the Czarist army. But because they make such terrible soldiers they are eventually discharged and sent back home. On one hand, the ending presents traditional Jews as unfit for "service" in European national culture. On the other hand, militarism is revealed as the kind of patriotic rubbish that people, including Jews, can do without. "Tell me, Sendril," Benjamin asks his mate, as the two bungle their marching drills, "who cares if I use my left foot or my right foot to turn around, isn't it all the same?"

The 1870s Yiddish version was a hopeful gesture that helped Abramovitch reach many of his fellow Jews and encourage them to embrace the world around them and become part of it. The 1890s Hebrew version celebrated the nation's heritage as a defiant response to the disappointments of the Enlightenment. And something had happened to Abramovitch's Hebrew in the intervening years. It had become less biblical and lofty, more relaxed, "contaminated" by Yiddish and other European languages. If it made Hebrew less pure, it also made it more pliant, a more modern idiom that was soon picked up by other writers.

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The New Life of Hebrew in Palestine

But if Abramovitch and his colleagues were busy compiling a modern Jewish library, their readership continued to decline. Most Jews were occupied with the ordinary stuff of an increasingly secular life and had little time or use for Hebrew. Many emigrated overseas in search of a better life, and those who remained in Europe continued to hope for integration. Hebrew became increasingly useless for both groups. "The Hebrew language," wrote David Frishman in 1901, "is bereft of speakers and readers, we have no people, no literature, no movement, no revival. We have nothing."[9]

Zionism was a game-changer, and it turned the fate of Hebrew around. It was yet another paradox, in which Hebrew flourished by breaking away from Jewish life in the Diaspora and by cutting ties with the very culture that had preserved it for centuries. If the *maskilim* were the first to imagine Hebrew in a secular context, Zionists gave that context a political turn. It was only when Zionists finally formulated a concrete political agenda that Smolenskin's call to take up Hebrew as a solution for the Jewish Problem became clear. With the establishment of a Jewish community in Palestine, Hebrew became a transcendent expression of it almost immediately. It was a singular historical moment, as Benjamin Harshav showed, a convergence of traditional Hebrew, modern literary Hebrew, and Zionism, a meeting that jolted the Hebrew language back to life; not a revival, perhaps, as Hebrew had never died, but a full return to the language.[10]

The fortunes of Hebrew under Zionism were very different from the previous history of the language. Since the late 1700s Modern Hebrew had led a rarified existence as a cultural conceit. In Palestine it became a cultural imperative. Joseph Klausner described it as a drama in three acts: the romantic act of the Haskala, the cultural act of the Revival, and the political act of Zionism.[11] It was a remarkable journey. When the First Zionist Congress met in 1897, subscriptions to Hebrew periodicals had fallen sharply and only about half of all schoolchildren in the Yishuv, the modern Jewish community in Palestine, were studying Hebrew.[12] By

[9] Quoted in Nurit Gertz, *Not from Here* (אל מה שנמוג), Am Oved, 1997.
[10] Shur, "The Complete Return to Hebrew," p. 84.
[11] Rachel Elboim-Dror, *Hebrew Education in the Land of Israel, Volume 1: 1854–1914* (החינוך העברי בארץ ישראל), Yad Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi, 1986, p. 310.
[12] Ibid., p. 203.

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1926 Hebrew was one of the official languages of the British Mandate in Palestine, together with English and Arabic. A decade later it was the principal language of about 400,000 residents of the Yishuv, a critical mass that sustained a vibrant culture in Hebrew.

It was neither an easy nor a simple change. In the early 1900s fewer than ten families in the Yishuv spoke Hebrew at home. The rest spoke a variety of languages that served them so well they were in no hurry to replace them. But the new immigrants who began arriving then were determined to change that. On his first day in Palestine in the winter of 1904, Shlomo Tzemach was shocked to hear the farmers in Rishon Letzion, a Jewish agricultural village that was set up in 1882, "speaking Yiddish, and Russian and French." Hebrew was nowhere to be heard. Disappointed and angry, he got up at the next town meeting and "in my bad Polish Hebrew [I told the townsfolk] never mind my young age, I will still fight you! Everyone laughed at me [and made fun of my Hebrew]." [13] But Tzemach and his fellow immigrants, who were consciously Zionist, turned Hebrew into a communal project. They forced themselves and others to speak Hebrew at home, at work, to the grocer, to the butcher, and even on their sickbeds. Nehama Puhachevska recalled how, when one of her friends fell ill with a high fever and started groaning in Russian, a Hebrew teacher who was present "demanded that the patient groan in Hebrew." Everyone got very upset.[14] It was an obsession, and almost all Yishuv members eventually subscribed to it, including writers, linguists, educators, and then Zionist organizations, who were able to spread the language on a bigger scale.[15]

Take the enthusiasm of one man, the legendary linguist Eliezer Perlman (1858–1922), better known as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, an early champion of Hebrew nationalism. In Zionist historiography Ben-Yehuda is what the British historian Thomas Carlyle called "a Great Man," an extraordinary person who singlehandedly changes history by the power of their actions. Reality was not as neat, of course. In the early 1880s, almost two decades before the rise of Zionism, the twenty-three-year-old

[13] Tzemach, *My Life Story*. At this town meeting Tzemach spoke up against the Uganda plan, but he made a point of doing so in Hebrew as a critique of the linguistic mishmash of the townsfolk.

[14] Nehama Puhachivska, "People Spoke Hebrew in Public" (דיברו עברית בחוצות), 1890, Hebrew Academy website, Archival Collection, available at https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2020/08/26/לקט-תעודות/.

[15] Elboim-Dror, *Hebrew Education*, ch. 4, pp. 204–403.

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Perlman published a series of fiery articles in the Hebrew press in support of Hebrew. In an 1881 article he wrote:

> Our Hebrew language is our national language … our forefathers shed blood like water … over every word of it, every letter, every dot. Why, the number of words in the Hebrew language is equal to the number of the victims sacrificed on its altar. It is the only precious thing left to us of our former glories. How can we abandon it? How can we add insult to the injury of our forefathers and let the angel of death take it? Our predecessors sinned by preferring foreign languages to Hebrew. Let the blood they shed and that of their children be their penance. For what is our excuse? How long will our language and our literature survive if we don't teach it to our children, if we don't revive it, if we don't turn it into a spoken language? And how can we do so if not by making it the language of instruction in schools?[16]

It was a striking idea that excited intense debates. Many thought it ridiculous, irrelevant, and especially impractical. But it didn't deter Ben-Yehuda, who went on to promote it as a writer, journalist, publisher, cultural entrepreneur, and visionary linguist. The trail he blazed began with his own children. Ben-Yehuda spoke only Hebrew to his first-born son, shocking many in the Yishuv. "Don't you feel sorry for the child?" Eliezer and his wife Dvora were asked when word about their Hebrew homeschooling got out. "Reviving Hebrew is all well and good for grownups … but why torture your child? … It's a crazy idea, nothing like it has ever been tried … Latin died as a spoken language, ancient Greek too, may it rest in peace, and here you are with plans to take a language that has not been spoken for two thousand years" and make it talk again. "Leave the child alone."[17] When their son Ben-Tzion (later Itamar) Ben-Yehuda, started speaking Hebrew, people journeyed from afar to witness the wonder: a native speaker of Hebrew. "What happened after God has opened [the child's] mouth to speak in Hebrew is hard to describe," remembered a local Jerusalem sage; "the news quickly spread around the city and became the main topic of conversation. People came in droves to marvel at it."[18]

[16] Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, "The Banner of Nationalism" (דגל הלאומיות), *Hamagid* 37 (Winter 1881), available at https://benyehuda.org/read/2635.

[17] Itamar Ben Avi, *The Dawn of Our Independence: The Memoirs of the First Hebrew Child* (עם שחר עצמאותנו: זכרונות־חייו של הילד העברי הראשון), https://benyehuda.org/read/15014.

[18] Ibid.

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The sensation was the age of the young speaker, not just the Hebrew he spoke. There were people who could speak Hebrew – men mostly – but it was a foreign language to them, and their speech was formal and stilted. Most Jews were familiar with a few set phrases from prayers and blessings, and the revival of spoken Hebrew owed a lot to that knowledge. But it was a passive and limited proficiency that was acquired with age and learning. Few if any people used Hebrew on a daily basis, and no one spoke the language fluently as a native. Ben-Yehuda changed that, and the change was thrilling. It was an important moment in the evolution of a language, which sprang out of the mouths of babes in the most literal sense. Ita Yelin, the wife of the well-known Hebraist David Yelin, confessed that her family "spoke Yiddish at home, and I only started learning and speaking Hebrew after my children enrolled in the first Hebrew kindergarten in Jerusalem" in 1903. As a "Hebrew mother [I] had no choice but to learn Hebrew from [my] children."[19]

Ben-Yehuda also helped to set up a Language Committee, a voluntary organization dedicated "to facilitate Hebrew as a spoken language in every aspect of life, at home, in schools, in public life, in commerce, construction, industry, art, the humanities and sciences," and to ensure the preservation of the Eastern character of the language.[20] Later named the Academy of the Hebrew Language, the committee thought of itself as the vanguard in an ongoing language war and acted accordingly. In its October 1911 meeting, Ahad Ha'am told those present, "I don't know if Hebrew is a living language yet, but since it is the language of instruction in all schools," and since every school makes up its own vocabulary, "we need to come up with one lexicon for all of them."[21] "The committee for color terms met this week," reported the secretary, S. Eisenstadt, in a letter to Bialik. "Tomorrow I'll start to organize new committees … we still haven't completed the list for construction terms and [the terms for] tailoring need attention too."[22] Ben-Yehuda

[19] Aharon Bar-Adon, "'Mother Tongue' in the Beginning, or, rather, 'Father Tongue' First? The Incipient Deprivation of the Woman's Role in the Revival of Hebrew," in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, World Union of Jewish Studies, 1989, division D, vol. 1, p. 106.

[20] Shur, "The Complete Return to Hebrew," p. 99.

[21] Minutes of the Language Committee meeting, October 1911 (ט"ז חשון תרע"ב), Hebrew Academy website, Archival Collection, available at https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2020/08/26/לקט-תעודות/.

[22] Letter from S. Eisenstadt to Bialik, May 26, 1932 (כ אייר תרצ"ב), National Library of Israel, Bialik House Archive.

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himself coined hundreds of new Hebrew words, neologisms such as newspaper (עיתון), airplane (אווירון), police (מִשטרה), towel (מַגֶבֶת), and ice-cream (גְלִידה). He also coined the word for dictionary (מילון) and went on to compose one, the monumental Ben-Yehuda dictionary of Modern Hebrew, which was completed after his death.

Others, such as Yehuda Leib Metmann (1869–1939) and his wife Fania (1874–1980), translated Ben-Yehuda's romantic ideas into more concrete educational programs, and established the first Hebrew high school in Jaffa in 1906. The idea for the school first came to the couple during a lecture Ahad Ha'am gave in Odessa in 1899. He had just returned from Palestine, and was depressed with the level of Hebrew he heard there. How can one develop respect for Hebrew if even teachers speak it in an "artificial, deficient, poor and wooden," way and lack the most basic vocabulary, he lamented. Teachers admitted to it themselves. "We had no words for towel, socks, interesting, seriousness. … "[We spoke] a broken language and used our hands and eyes" a lot.[23]

Moved by the address, the Metmanns organized what they called a Revival Army, a group of fellow Hebraists who vowed to change things by becoming Hebrew educators in Palestine. The first item on their visionary agenda was a Hebrew gymnasium (high school) in Palestine dedicated to encouraging young Jews to love their land; fostering the spirit of the Hebrew national revival in parents and students; and developing Hebrew into the spoken language of the Land of Israel.[24]

In 1906, seven years on and wielding Swiss PhDs in education, the couple moved to Palestine, took on a Hebrew name, Matmon-Cohen, and opened a Hebrew school for ten students in their two-room apartment in Jaffa. Four years and 195 students later, the school moved to a beautiful new building in Tel Aviv under a new name, the Herzlia Gymnasium, and became a leading educational institution in the Yishuv. This extraordinary story was less an exception than the rule during those heady times, in which Hebrew educators advanced the cause of Hebrew, probably more than anyone else in the Yishuv.

And while early education in the Yishuv eventually became the domain of women, at first their limited access to Hebrew hampered their professional development. Some of the first women teachers were wives of Hebrew educators, such as Fania Matmon-Cohen, who

[23] Elboim-Dror, *Hebrew Education*, p. 367.
[24] Ibid., pp. 242–243.

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taught math at the Herzlia Gymnasium or high school in Tel Aviv and wrote one of the first math textbooks in Hebrew; during the first years she also helped by washing the floors of the school. Later, the number of professional teachers grew, especially kindergarten teachers, who taught the first generation of native Hebrew speakers. When Yehudit Eisenberg (later Harari) (1885–1979) started her stint at the college for kindergarten teachers in Jerusalem – after running a kindergarten in Rehovot at the age of sixteen! – she was excited about the chance to "Jewfy [*sic*] seven hundred girls … and inspire a proper sense of nationalism in them." She was encouraged by a former teacher, who wrote her, "How wonderful it would be if you taught six hundred, even a thousand girls, who would then go on to teach another thousand. Is there anything more gratifying than this?"[25]

But it was a formidable task, especially in the beginning. "I was in charge of 16 children aged 2 to 7," wrote a young woman in the late 1890s. "I couldn't do much with them because we didn't have proper materials … the only option was to go outside … tell stories and sing songs out in nature."[26] Another teacher, who trained in Germany in the early 1900s and was preparing to go to Palestine, remembered how she "collected songs I learned in Germany and asked [a poet friend] to translate them into Hebrew. Later on my trip I met author David Frishman, who let me have translations he made of some of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales."[27] It was a dedication well rewarded. In 1888 an enthusiastic visitor to a school in Rishon Letzion reported how "during class time, only Hebrew is heard in the school. Occasionally, the teachers take the children out for hikes. … It's a pleasure to see the children play, joke and squabble in Hebrew. During the outing, the teachers tell the kids the Hebrew names of everything they see – mountain, valley, hill, stream, field, etc., as well as the names of plants and animals."[28]

Eventually, eclectic materials were replaced with more programmatic texts, written especially for children by local songsters and musicians;

[25] Margalit Shiloh, *The Challenge of Gender: Women in the Early Yishuv* (אתגר המגדר, נשים בעליות הראשונות), Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 2007, p. 128.
[26] Miriam Snapir, Shosh Siton, and Gila Ruso-Zimet, eds., *One Hundred Years of Kindergarten in the Land of Israel* (מאה שנות גן ילדים בארץ ישראל), Ben-Gurion University Press, 2012, p. 45.
[27] Ibid., p. 50.
[28] *Hatzvi*, May–June 1888.

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texts that not only taught Hebrew but "Jewfied" students as well, as Harari put it, by instilling a sense of Hebrew nationalism in them: textbooks that celebrated the flowers and animals of Palestine, introduced changes to the Jewish festival calendar, and served the Hebrew Bible as a national tale of action and adventure. "We now have 150 Hebrew schools in Palestine with more than 20,000 students and 1,000 teachers," noted one of them with pleasure in 1929. "I feel proud and heartened when I think how much of our nation's revival is owed to [our work]."[29]

In the 1920s some of those dutiful students must have made their Hebrew teachers proud by composing poems that demonstrated the lessons they learned:

In the Homeland, Esther Hananit, 8th grade

I love you, O homeland, on long hot days,
when the sand burns the feet and the air is as hot as a furnace,
lips cleave together,
and the world is thirsty.

I love you on calm, bright, moonlit nights,
when the world is covered with a dappled sheet of lights and shadows.
I love you on joyous days,
when I feel like dancing and singing forever.
And on sad days, when eyes tear up,
And the heart shrinks with sorrow – I love you always.[30]

But the most dramatic moment in the transformation of Hebrew from an affectation to an everyday reality was the language war of 1913–1914, which secured the status of Hebrew as the lingua franca of the Yishuv. The conflict broke out because the first university in Palestine, the technical college in Haifa, later named the Technion, announced its intention to use German as the language of instruction. The decision made sense because there were no textbooks in Hebrew at the time and because the college was planned and funded by German Jews. But the initiative was passionately opposed, at first by the students themselves, who wrote to the college to say they were "shocked and dismayed to

[29] H. A. Zuta, "We Have Made it" (אשרינו שזכינו לכך), 1929, Hebrew Academy website, Archival Collection, available at https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2020/08/26/לקט-תעודות/.

[30] David Shahar, *Myth and Education* (מיתוס וחינוך), Resling, 2021, p. 199.

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hear that Hebrew will not be the language of instruction in the technical college in Haifa. As graduates of Hebrew schools in the Land of Israel, we won't accept it."[31] Led by those students, who pulled their parents into it and eventually also their teachers, and then the entire Yishuv, protesters staged strikes, organized marches, and held rallies in support of Hebrew.

In one of the biggest rallies, 2,500 enthusiasts gathered in the Herzlia Gymnasium with banners displaying slogans such as "Long live the Hebrew Language!" "War against defilers of our language!" and "Hebrew means independence!" One of the teachers who was at the rally later wrote about "speeches and battle cries" that were so rousing that some people in the crowd fainted. "My own heart was pounding … I know many others who, like me, are willing to fight [for Hebrew] until their last drop of blood. Is there anything holier than [our national language]?" he concluded the letter with dramatic flair.[32]

Fundraising dinners were held to collect money in support of the cause, and local businesses in Jerusalem announced discounts for protesters, who marched through the city, singing, "Rejoice, make merry / the public we carry / a day full of joy / let us Hebrew employ (גילו גילו/ המעגל הגדילו / יום זה לשמחה לנו נכון/ העברית השיגה ניצחון)."[33] The campaign ended with a decisive victory for Hebrew and marked the rising power of the Yishuv in world Zionist politics. The war also stressed the difference between Zionism and the diasporic Jewish culture that gave birth to it. Yiddish was one of the first casualties in a culture war that later turned against Jewish life in the Diaspora more generally and eventually developed into what came to be known as the Zionist Negation of Exile, which, so to speak, canceled Jewish life outside of Palestine/Israel.

A more eccentric example of the passion for Hebrew was an organization called the Language Defense Brigade (גדוד מגיני השפה), a free association of high-school students, teachers, and intellectuals who devoted themselves to the cause. They volunteered to teach Hebrew, organized public events to promote it, and were not squeamish about shaming people who failed to use Hebrew. Their most notorious encounter was with the venerated poet Haim Nahman Bialik, who was reprimanded one day by a brigade member for speaking Yiddish in public. When

[31] Elboim-Dror, *Hebrew Education*, p. 326.
[32] Ibid., pp. 335–336.
[33] Ibid., p. 336.

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the offended poet scolded the lad for his chutzpah, the young man filed a suit against him. In his statement to the court, Bialik described how

> my friend Mr. Rawnitzki and I were walking along Allenby Street, speaking quietly with one another in Yiddish, as we have done for the past twenty-eight years, when I noticed a man walking next to us listening to our conversation. A moment later the man turned to us and had the audacity to demand, 'Why aren't you speaking Hebrew? You should speak Hebrew!' I replied to him, in Hebrew: 'It is none of your business. No one asked you. Go away, damn you.' The gall!"

The poet was acquitted.[34]

A Hebrew Accent

Accent became an ideological issue too, complicated by the various reading traditions of Hebrew as the language of Jewish scripture and, sometimes, as a language of communication between Jews from different parts of the world. The best-known example of such connections comes from Benjamin ben Yona, who in the twelfth century traveled from Tudela in Spain to Jewish communities as far away as Babel and Yemen. Benjamin of Tudela used book Hebrew to speak with the Jews he met on his journey, and when he returned home after ten years on the road he published a Hebrew account of his travels entitled *The Travels of Benjamin*; *The Travels of Benjamin the Third* by Abramovich is a reference to this original travelogue. As a native of Tudela in the north of Spain, Benjamin probably spoke Sephardi Hebrew,[35] one of three distinct varieties, together with the Ashkenazi Hebrew of Central and Eastern Europe, and the more isolated form of Hebrew spoken in Yemen.

Zionists opted for the Sephardi pronunciation of Hebrew. First, it was common in Palestine. "Most of the [Jewish men] speak [some form of] Hebrew," reported a visitor to Jerusalem in 1857, "and foreigners who wish to deal with them but cannot speak Hebrew in the manner of

[34] For a short description of the incident and the protocol of the trial see Avner Holtzman, "Then Bialik Told Him, Go to Hell," *Davka: Eretz Yiddish Vetarbuta* 3 (2007): 18–19, available at https://bethshalomaleichem.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Davka_3_New_2021.pdf.

[35] *Sepharad* is the Hebrew word for Spain. Sephardi is an adjective that describes anything connected with the Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492 and dispersed primarily across the Mediterranean rim.

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Spanish [Jews] will not make much headway."[36] Second, they believed it was closer to the sound of ancient Hebrew than any other extant Hebrew accent. There was no way of knowing this, of course, but Sephardi Hebrew fit the Romantic Nationalism of Zionists and served their rejection of Ashkenazi culture.

Sephardi Accent vs. Ashkenazi Accent

Modern Israeli Hebrew retained very few of the so-called Sephardi features:

1. An ultimate stress: Shabbat instead of Shabbos;
2. An open A sound instead of O: Shabbat instead of Shabbos;
3. No difference between stressed T (t) and unstressed T (s): Shabbat instead of Shabbos.

The vocal tradition of Biblical Hebrew was fixed early in the Middle Ages by Jewish grammarians in the Galilean town of Tiberias. Hebrew had fallen out of everyday use by then, and efforts to record and preserve the pronunciation of the consonantal language led scholars to develop annotations that helped readers vocalize it. The system consisted of small strokes and dots, called diacritic signs, that were marked above, below, and through the script and indicated proper pronunciation, similar to the function of vowels in the Latin alphabet. Dubbed the Tiberian tradition or Masora, the signs were adopted as a standard throughout the Jewish world, although actual pronunciation of these marked texts differed from region to region depending on a number of variables.

א בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ. ב וְהָאָרֶץ, הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ, וְחֹשֶׁךְ,
עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם; וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם. ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אוֹר;
וַיְהִי-אוֹר. ד וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאוֹר, כִּי-טוֹב; וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים, בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין
הַחֹשֶׁךְ. ה וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָאוֹר יוֹם, וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לָיְלָה; וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר, יוֹם אֶחָד.

Genesis 1:1–5 with the Tiberian annotation system, developed to help readers pronnce th consnntl lngge (or: pronounce the consonantal language). Modern Hebrew dispensed with the signs, which means that reading the

[36] Yosef Ofer, "The Beginning of Israeli Accent" (ראשיתו של המבטא הישראלי), in A. Maman, F. E. Fassberg, and Y. Breuer, eds., *Sha'arei Lashon: Studies in Hebrew, Aramaic and Jewish Languages Presented to Moshe Bar-Asher*, vol. 3, Mossad Bialik, 2007, p. 166.

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language today is a kind of guessing game, which slows the learning process but speeds up reading later.

Another benefit of the Sephardi accent was its connections with Arabic, a sister language that, for Zionists, affirmed the Jewish link to Palestine. The decision to use it was never taken officially, but rather was spontaneous. It is only natural, said the Hebraist David Yelin, that "an Eastern language, should be spoken as such."[37] Schools were instrumental in instilling it, and teachers became its important cultural agents. "Politically speaking," said the Zionist leader Menachem Ussishkin, echoing Ben-Yehuda's earlier words, "the prattle of small children, the study of botany in school … even a street sign in pidgin Hebrew, are more important for our national revival than the greatest literary or poetic work."[38] And because schools educated the young, what happened between their walls shaped the cultural reality of the Yishuv. "It is now impossible to speak Ashkenazi Hebrew in the Land of Israel," reported Joseph Klausner in 1912, "because children think it wrong" and make fun of you.[39]

But was the new Hebrew of the Yishuv a Semitic language? It was a surprising question that came up early in the revival of Hebrew. Some scholars claimed that spoken Hebrew owed its rapid growth to the existing infrastructure of Yiddish, a Germanic language, which the revivers of Hebrew speech had allegedly dressed up with a square Aramaic script and given a Semitic lexicon that made it look old. In other words, they felt that Modern Hebrew only looks Semitic, but is in fact Indo-European at its core.[40] It's an academic question that has never shaken the belief of most Modern Hebrew speakers that they are indeed speaking the language of the Hebrew Bible. The fact that Israelis can generally understand their Bible with little difficulty may have something to do with that belief, as well as with the mandatory schooling they receive in it.

What did not change, of course, was the wealth of associations Hebrew carried with it into modernity. That was the price paid for

[37] Ibid., p. 170.
[38] Abraham Ussishkin, *Ussishkin Book* (ספר אוסישקין), Hamol, 1933, p. 188.
[39] Elboim-Dror, *Hebrew Education*, pp. 373–374.
[40] Shur, "The Complete Return to Hebrew," p. 90. The latest iteration of this debate took place in 2008, when Ghil'ad Zuckermann argued that Israeli Hebrew is not a Semitic language: *Israeli – A Beautiful Language* (ישראלית שפה יפה), Am Oved, 2008.

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reanimating an ancient language that for most of its long life had been used primarily in faith-based contexts. Even if those associations were secularized by modern users of the language, Israeli Hebrew retained many of the old theological connotations, as Gershom Scholem famously pointed out in 1926. "If we teach our children this secret language and revive it, the religious force it packs may one day blow up in their faces," he wrote to a friend, the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. "This modern Hebrew is very dangerous. It cannot and will not remain [a secular tongue]. … We speak a ghostly language" that may one day come to haunt us, Scholem continued, warning that the revival of Hebrew would likely also revive the rich sacred traditions that were imbedded in it. Anyone who thinks otherwise, he prophesied, is deluding themselves.[41]

From Hebrew to Israeli Literature

The growth of a Hebrew-speaking community in Palestine did not change the nature of Hebrew literature to the same degree that it changed the language. The expansion of the Yishuv shifted most of the creative work in Hebrew from Europe to Palestine, but with more than a hundred years of history by then, modern Hebrew literature did not require the monumental revival efforts that the spoken language needed. Literature became an integral part of Yishuv culture, which it predated by a century and, in some ways, laid the ground for. It was not many years before it was bound up with Yishuv life in the natural way of all living literatures.

And yet the rapid adoption of Hebrew as a vernacular had visible effects on poetry and prose. One predictable change was an expanding vocabulary and more natural ways of expressing it. The Hebrew authors who predated the Yishuv were consummate Hebraists, but their literary Hebrew was ultimately artificial, no matter how talented they were. It was a made-up language that had no relationship to a lived linguistic experience because none existed. It was only inevitable that, once the language began circulating more widely, older works of literature would become progressively outdated. Even the works of writers who predated the Yishuv by a few decades, gifted writers such as Abramovitch and

[41] Franz Rosenzweig, "An Oath to our Language" (הצהרת אמונים לשפה שלנו), in a collection of Scholem's writing, *Another Thing* (עוד דבר), ed. Avraham Shapira, Am Oved, 1989, pp. 59–60.

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Berdichevsky, began to be overshadowed by more contemporary works. It was not only a question of language but of life too.

Subject matter was another change, a shift in focus from Jewish life in the Diaspora to life in the Yishuv. The early work of Moshe Smilansky is a dramatic example of it. In the 1910s Smilansky published a collection of tales under the exotic title *The Sons of Arabia* (בני ערב), short stories that were inspired by his contacts with the Arabs of Palestine. The work fascinated readers in the Yishuv and abroad, who were drawn by its blend of Hebraism and orientalism. As Europeans, they felt superior to the Arab "noble savages." As Jews, they felt a special connection to them as fellow "orientals."[42]

As the Jewish settlement in Palestine grew, poets and writers turned their attention to the new reality that was taking shape all around them. At first the shift was more deliberate, guided by programmatic editors. But as the Yishuv took root, editors became less heavy-handed. In the 1920s and 1930s poetry and prose grew progressively more enthusiastic about life in the new country. The restoration of Jewish self-rule was felt to be so momentous that writers often spoke of it in spiritual terms. For a society that tried to recreate itself as both Jewish and secular, it was a paradox that yielded a rich poetic harvest.

כפרקי נבואה בוערים ימותי בכל הגילויים, "My days burn like prophecies in all their revelations," wrote Uri Zvi Greenberg in his 1920s poem "With my God, the Blacksmith":

> My days burn like prophecies in all their revelations,
> my body pressed between them like a metal block about to be melted.
> Over me stands my blacksmithing God and bangs down heroically:
> Every wound, that time has cut in me, opens a gash
> that lets out the pent-up fire in time sparks.

The Romantic motif of the suffering poet receives a distinctly Zionist expression in this poem through the sanctification of hard, physical labor, a central tenet of Zionist ideology, which is stressed in the next stanza:

> This is the fateful lot I serve daily till dusk.
> And when I lay down my banged-up block of a body,
> my mouth is an open wound,

[42] Yaron Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination*, Cornell University Press, 2005.

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and naked I speak to my God: you have toiled.
Night has come; let us both rest.[43]

The poem paints two complementary images, one in which the aching poet is validated as a laborer, the other in which physical labor turns into prophecy. The biblical allusions, especially in the first stanza, endow both poet and laborer with spirituality and transcendence. Language and labor are consecrated in this poem by Greenberg, who was not unusual in this regard. Many of his contemporaries wrote works that expressed the solemnity with which they regarded their own lives and times.

In this poem by Esther Raab, one of the first native Hebrew poets of the Yishuv, the Land of Israel is quietly hallowed:

A white day celebrates your bareness,
you, who are so impoverished and rich,
a mountain freezes like a wall,
as clear as mirage,
cleaving to the offing.
Noon. Your sweeping fields burst into flame
and your depths rise up playfully
against the white sky,
like a never-ending curtain,
drawing, quivering.
In the plain
a hill jots like a round breast,
a white tomb on top;
and in the empty fields after the harvest,
a thorny, lonely bush.
And should the eye tire
of the blinding light,
let it dip in the green of the thorny bush,
as in a pool of fresh water.

Impoverished, you with your red slits
in the golden distance
with your dry, white riverbeds –
How beautiful you are![44]

[43] Uri Zvi Greenberg, "With my God, the Blacksmith," in Uri Zvi Greenberg, *Midworld in Midtime: A Selection of Poems from the 1920s and 1930s*, selected by Binyamin Harushovsky (באמצע העולם ובאמצע הזמנים שירים), Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 1979, p. 74 (my translation).

[44] Esther Raab, *Collected Poems* (כל השירים), ed. Ehud Ben-Ezer, Zmora-Bitan,

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Although the tone of Raab's poem is not as grand as that of Greenberg's, the land is still an ethereal vision, not a rich or lush land but rather dry and empty. The intense heat and the blinding light summon up an arid landscape, a desert, to which the tomb and the thorny bush add an unforgiving aspect. And yet this stark landscape is pronounced beautiful, and its feminine attributes – the breast, the vaginal allusions – give it intimacy and intensity.

Similar feelings toward Jewish history, the Hebrew Bible, land, and labor were shared by many writers at the time, who focused again and again on the astonishing transformation Jewish life in Palestine was undergoing in the first decades of the twentieth century with quasi-religious and high-flying lines such as "Massada, open your gates and give me refuge! / I shall place my crumbling soul at your feet – / lay it on the anvil of your rocks and hammer it into/something new!" (Yitzhak Lamdan, "Masada"); "My Land, my [en]lighted land – a chariot of fire among the world's mountains" (Yocheved bat Miriam, "Eretz Israel"); "Oh, blessed are the fingers / which hold the sickle on harvest day" (Abraham Shlonsky, "Labor" [עמל]); "The sea of wheat swells / The flock bells ring / This is my land and its fields / This is the valley of Jezre'el" (Nathan Alterman, "Song of the Valley" (שיר העמק).

Later, as some of these transformations became more commonplace, lofty expressions of this kind subsided as well. Writing in the 1980s, the literary critic Gershon Shaked summarized the role of Hebrew literature in modern Jewish life by drawing an arc that began in the late eighteenth century and ended with the eventual establishment of a Hebrew-speaking Jewish state almost two hundred years later. While a great variety of historical and other causes led to the establishment of Israel, wrote Shaked, it was the textual world of modern Hebrew poetry and literature a century earlier, he claimed, that first suggested its possibility.[45]

Some decades earlier, in 1924, the critic Yaacov Rabinowitz had a less programmatic view of Hebrew literature in the Yishuv, which would naturally be different from literature in Hebrew that was written elsewhere. And as if anticipating Scholem's words two years later,

1988, pp. 9–10 (my translation). For a selection of Raab's poems in English see Esther Raab, *Thistles: Selected Poems of Esther Raab*, trans. Harold Schimmel, Ibis Editions, 2002.

[45] Yaron Peleg, "The Critic as a Dialectical Zionist: Gershon Shaked's Hebrew Fiction 1880–1980," *Prooftexts* 23: 3 (Fall 2003): 382–396.

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he imagined that it probably "won't be Jewish in the same way, but human, multifaceted. Its Jewishness will be different, adapted to life in Palestine as a natural part of it. … It would be pointless to rejoice or grumble about it, we simply need to look ahead with understanding."[46]

[46] Yaacov Rabinowitz, *Our Literature and Life* (ספרותינו וחיינו), in *The Paths of Literature* (מסלולי ספרות), 1971, quoted by Avner Holtzman in https://onegshabbat.blogspot.com/2022/05/blog-post_20.html.

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