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LANGUAGE IN NATIONALISM: MODERN HEBREW IN THE ZIONIST PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of Israel's lingua franca as a constituent of the Zionist project. Based largely on recent scholarship, this work sheds light on the role of language in the educational and political efforts to create a New Hebrew Man who, in contradistinction to the European Jew, was to live 'as a free man' in his own land. Reflecting Jewish experience in the Russian Empire, these efforts alienated traditional, particularly non-Ashkenazi Jews. The article addresses the question of the uniqueness of the modern Israeli vernacular that contributes to the historical legitimacy of Zionism and the state of Israel.

Language is one of the key ingredients of organic nationalism, of which Zionism is but one example. It assumes even greater importance when the other elements of collective identity begin to wane, leaving something of a vacuum. Modern national identity often rests upon a frequently romanticised sense of belonging to a linguistic group and to a territory. Zionism accords paramount importance to the language. In Europe, where Zionism was born, the language 'replaced territory as the focus of national awakening', which explains why 'unique among national movements, Zionism might be said to have been conceived in language' (Chaver 2004: 2).

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This may not only result from the absence of its 'own' territory but also reflect the traditional Jewish emphasis on the word as something fundamental and primordial. Certain trends in Jewish tradition consider Hebrew letters to exist prior to Creation. According to a classical commentary on the first verse of Genesis, God looked at the letters of the Torah and created the world.

Traces of this centrality of the written word could be found among secularised Jews long after they abandoned Judaic practice and learning (for example, the works by Jacques Derrida). In line with European ethnic nationalism, Zionist ideology claimed to 'own' Hebrew as its exclusive 'national' inheritance. Just as the land, 'language—imagined as a cultural territory—is similarly treated as a matter of exclusive ownership, as if it too needs to be protected and guarded against invasions and repopulation. . . . In other words, it is not only about *how* and *what* language is used, but also about *who* uses it' (Hochberg 2007: 74–75). This process of ethno-nationalisation of Hebrew intensified after the proclamation of the state in 1948 as part of the general attempt to nationalise Jews.

From the early 20th century, the new common language was meant to form the New Hebrew Man, an antithesis of the Diaspora Jew. This New Hebrew rooted in his land and his language would lead 'an entirely unprecedented kind of Jewish life' (Saposnik 2008: 6). The idea of radical modernisation, involving forced transformation of the most intimate habits of the individual, is an integral part of Russian history. The reforms of Peter the Great, for example, subordinated religion to the state, imposed changes in the Russian language and compulsory shaving off of beards. The Bolshevik revolution, among other policies, overtly fought religion, operated another reform of the language, and attempted to change the very structure of the family. The past was presented as irredeemably musty and stagnant.

Russian nationals formed the hard core of Zionist activism. Many of them were inspired by the Russian revolution, imbued with anti-Jewish stereotypes, and ready to obliterate two millennia of Jewish history as shameful and leading to degeneration. David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), the true founder of the State of Israel, was an admirer of Lenin and the Communist takeover in Russia, 'the great revolution, the primordial upheaval that would uproot present-day reality, shaking this rotten, decadent society to its very depths' (Barnavi 2000: 219). No wonder, the early Zionist settlers were intent on 'inventing a Land, and inventing a Nation' (Berlovitz 1996).

Jewish *selbhass* or self-hate is a constituent of Zionist ideology. In this case, it is expressed as 'negation of the Diaspora' and its vernacular, Yiddish. The word 'Hebrew' became synonymous to 'new' and 'pioneer'

in the Zionists' vocabulary. The new nation was to be Hebrew, not Jewish, and it was to dwell in Hebrew villages away from the Jewish *shtetls* of Eastern Europe where most Zionist pioneers had been born and bred. Moreover, 'the opposition 'Hebrew-Jewish' is still resonant today' (Chaver 2004: 15), even though the Zionists' hatred of the multilingual and multicultural reality of the pre-Zionist Palestine (just as their disdain of the multilingual and multicultural reality of Eastern Europe) has since abated.

To the extent it stems from earlier versions of Hebrew, Modern Hebrew appears as an unprecedented historical achievement that represents a breakaway from its status as the language of prayer and Torah (*leshon ha-kodesh*). Significantly, the few rabbinical authorities that supported the Hebrew revival, which began in the mid-19th century, did so invoking European nationalism rather than the Jewish tradition (Avineri 1998: 3). The revival of Romanian, Polish and Hungarian strengthened hopes of hammering out a modern language invoking its origins in biblical and rabbinical Hebrew. 'The selective reconstruction of Antiquity was part of the historical mission of reviving the ancient national roots and spirit. Antiquity became both a source of legitimacy and an object of admiration' (Zerubavel 1995: 25).

By the end of the 19th century, a few intellectuals in Europe began to use Hebrew as a spoken language. The Zionists were not the first to insist upon using the national language in their homes: many Eastern and Central European nationalists, whose languages had been abandoned by the elites in favour of a universal vernacular, either German or Russian, did very much the same. Several national elites from within the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires felt obliged to learn the national language from the peasants, who were the only ones to speak it on a daily basis, and then to enrich it for use in the sciences, in philosophy and in politics. The challenge of Hebrew was quite the opposite: it was necessary to take the language of the rabbis and the scholars and to adapt it for use in society, in agriculture or in industry. The challenge was all the more daunting in that, at the end of the 19th century, there existed no societies, no farms, and no industries where the new language could be used.

The enthusiastic supporters of Hebrew as a modern vernacular needed only to look around them for encouraging experiments and examples to be emulated. Encounters and conflicts between competing nationalisms were commonplace in 19th century Central Europe. Inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), the ideologue of the 18th century German cultural renaissance, several members of the nationalist elites of Central and Eastern Europe sought to transmit the national language to their children. Their aim was to create a literature in the national idiom, in order to

develop a sense of common history, a ‘national spirit’, indispensable for the nation-state to come into being.

Secular literature in Hebrew spread throughout 19th century Europe, but the Russian Empire, with a Jewish male population more at home in biblical Hebrew than in Russian, provided the most fertile ground for the propagation of Zionism, and thus of modern Hebrew. Several former students of the famous Lithuanian yeshivas, that of Volozhin for example, abandoned Judaism and became the pillars of the new Hebrew literature, and cultural icons of Zionism. A portion of the Jewish intelligentsia would also employ Hebrew in journalism.

The main impetus for Hebrew usage came from Zionist pioneers from Russia, particularly those that arrived in Palestine while the 1905 revolution was ravaging their native country. Their efforts were crowned with success when the British authorities decided to recognise Hebrew as one of the three official languages of Palestine, alongside Arabic and English. This achievement came in the wake of a series of important victories for the new language such as the adoption of Hebrew as the medium in Zionist schools and the publication of several Hebrew periodicals.

The first novel written in Hebrew retraces the biblical story in a format reminiscent of other European nationalist literatures (Aberbach 1998). It was written within the confines of the Russian Empire, in Lithuania, where two nationalisms – Polish and Lithuanian – were locked in conflict, each glorifying its past in modern literary forms, and, of course, in its own national language. Sometimes, they had to share the same literary figures, e.g. Adam Mickiewicz for the Poles, Adomas Mickevičius for the Lithuanians.

In fact, even prior to Zionism and Zionist settlement, Ottoman authorities in Palestine, recognising the Jews as a *millet*, i.e. an administrative unit, expected them to use a common language. This led to limited use of Hebrew, a language hitherto reserved for liturgy and scholarship, as a spoken language among Palestinian Jewish notables (Kuzar 2001: 7). This form of Hebrew had served as a lingua franca between different Jewish communities in Palestine long before the arrival of Zionist settlers from Russia. But once Hebrew became part of the Zionist project, traditional communities recoiled from using Hebrew in conversation altogether (Saposnik 2008: 66).

Creating a Zionist Language

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), usually considered to be the instigator of the Hebrew revival, was originally Lazar Perlman, a graduate of a Talmudic school in the Russian Empire. At age 17, Lazar experienced a heavenly vision: that of a national revival in the Land of Israel. Logically,

the idea of creating a modern Zionist vernacular and inventing a universal language (Esperanto) emerged at the same time in the minds of two young Jews, Lazar Perlman and Lazar Zamenhoff, from the same region of the Russian Empire, south-western Lithuania and eastern Poland, where five languages – Russian, German, Yiddish, Polish and Lithuanian – coexisted in everyday use.

The creation of a national language became Ben-Yehuda's overriding objective. Upon settling in Jerusalem in 1881, his home became the first to use modern Hebrew as a vernacular. In open revolt against Judaism, he promoted the secularisation of the language as a means of creating the New Hebrew Man. The promoters of the new vernacular assigned a new, secular meaning to traditional Judaic concepts. Thus the word *bitahon*, which means 'trust in God', came to mean 'military security'. The shift was far from innocent: the effect was to distance the new Hebrew language from traditional sources, and at the same time, to approach and win over traditionalist Jews who were drawn by terms familiar to them. The process of distancing concentrated on the meanings of words precisely because the words themselves retained their original form. Thus the messianic term *kibbutz galuyoth*, the 'in-gathering of exiles', came to mean, in the new context, 'immigration;' the eschatological term *keren kayemet*, 'permanent fund', which originally meant the accumulation of merits in this life to be 'expended' in the world to come, was transformed into the name of the Jewish National Fund, the real estate arm of the Zionist movement. Another example is the word *agadah*, which denotes the ethical and inspirational – and non-legal – parts of the Talmud. In modern Hebrew, *agadah* has taken on the meaning of legend, made-up story. Such shifts in meaning have been the object of strong Judaic criticism, for they tend to undermine the meaning these words enjoy in Jewish tradition, and thus undermine tradition itself.

Thus, a Zionist interpretive framework replaced the Judaic one in Israeli literature, opening up new opportunities to denigrate Judaism. In this spirit Nathan Alterman, the national poet, borrowed a part of the Jewish holiday liturgy: 'You have chosen us from all peoples. You loved us and found favour in us . . .' as inspiration for the title of his poem, 'Of All Peoples', which deals with the Shoah. The poem, which suggests that God had chosen the Jews in order to kill them, to destroy them in the gas chambers, was later integrated into the official celebration of Independence Day (Geffen 2002: 11–15).

Many Zionists dreamt of converting the Jews, whom they imagined as meek and pliable, into a proud nation of iron:

Iron, from which everything that the national machine requires should be made. Does it require a wheel? Here I am. A nail, a screw, a girder? Here I am. Police? Doctors? Actors? Water carriers? Here I am. I have no features,

no feelings, no psychology, no name of my own. I am a servant of Zion, prepared for everything, bound to nothing, having one imperative: Build! (Schechtman 1961: 410)

There is an undeniably Russian flavour to this rhetoric: iron and steel were the Bolsheviks' metaphors of choice. Stalin (whose *nom de guerre* means 'man of steel') used his private conversations with Lenin to legitimise his own policies of mass mobilisation.

The imposition of Hebrew was part of a negation of Jewish tradition, whose 'exilic'² character the Zionists have so frequently derided. This approach to the Jewish past also had an impact on the nature of the archaeological explorations that the founders of the State used in order to develop the new national consciousness: vestiges of the Hebrew-speaking biblical period received virtually all attention, while official archaeology long ignored Jewish monuments of the polyglot post-biblical era when the rabbis of the day lived in harmony with the Romans, and laid the groundwork for the tradition of non-violent compromise that is the distinguishing mark of rabbinical Judaism. The creation of modern Hebrew has, of necessity, been accompanied by the emergence of a historical narrative adapted to the needs of Zionism.

The language of redemption is omnipresent in most versions of Zionist ideology. The idea that the land was to be redeemed 'in blood and fire' had become dominant well before any shots were fired and actual blood was spilled in the course of the Zionist settlement (Saposnik 2008: 240). The dominant trend, Ben-Gurion's Labourites, make a particularly coherent use of redemptive imagery. The expression *geulath haaretz*, redemption of the land, was henceforth used to signify the purchase of Arab land by Jews, 'sometimes shady real-estate transactions' (Avineri 1998: 6).

The Passover *Haggadah*, a seminal canonical text about Redemption, also became an instrument of secularisation. While keeping its title, it underwent major changes at the hands of the Zionist education system. While references to God disappeared, the *Haggadah* read in certain Leftist kibbutzim replaced God by Stalin, 'who led us out of the house of slavery'. This transubstantiation of the language of redemption, of religious values into secular concepts, infused the Zionist pioneers, who saw themselves as the vanguard of the Jewish people, fashioning history with their own hands, with great power. Similar revolutionary versions of the *Haggadah* – but in Yiddish – were printed in thousands of copies in the

² The neologism *galuti* or *exilic* reflects a disdain for life in other countries, presented as a life with neither roots nor vigour; the term was introduced into modern Hebrew by two nationalist authors: Itamar Ben-Avi, son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, and Uri Tsvi Greenberg. It can be compared to the term 'rootless cosmopolitan' introduced into Russian during the antisemitic persecutions that took place under Stalin, and which also has a pejorative connotation, though more limited than the Hebrew neologism.

Soviet Union in an attempt to use traditional forms to convey novel ideas. Zionists used Judaic terms familiar to the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe in order to facilitate the propagation of an ideology, which, though radical, retained some traditional forms in order to appease widespread apprehension. This is how new Zionist sacralities were established in the course of the development of 'a new civil religion, which places the individual's obligations to the nation at its centre' (Liebman 1983: 229).

Rejection of the Zionist Vernacular

Opposition to the nationalist conceptualisation of the Jew and of his history was as intense as it was immediate. Even those rabbis who at first encouraged settlement in Palestine in the closing decades of the 19th century felt obliged to turn against the Zionists. What made the Jews unique, they declared, was neither the territory of the Land of Israel nor the Hebrew language, but the Torah and the practice of its commandments (Rabkin 2006).

Rabbis have voiced sharp disapproval of the Zionist emphasis on the role of the 'Volk' as the exclusive subject of Jewish history:

There is no Jewish nation. The Jews form, it is true, a separate stock [*Stamm*], a special religious community. They should cultivate the ancient Hebrew language, study their rich literature, know their history, cherish their faith, and make the greatest sacrifices for it; they should hope and trust in the wisdom of divine providence, the promises of their prophets, and the development of humankind so that the sublime ideas and truths of Judaism may gain the day. But for the rest, they should amalgamate with the nations whose citizens they are, fight in their battles, and promote their institutions for the welfare of the whole. (Wistrich 1998: 145)

For the critics of Zionism, the introduction of modern Hebrew had nothing to do with Jewish continuity but represented what they saw as another revolt against tradition. Some protested against the profanation of the sacred tongue, others saw it as a Zionist plot to take over, then deform, a language that had been the bearer of tradition.

Many historians attribute the success of the propagation of modern Hebrew to the revolt against Judaism. In discussing the anti-religious generation of the founding fathers of Zionism, they note:

Only for them could the Hebrew language become a national language and virtually lose its religious value . . . Only for them could the collective Jewish identity be considered in historical terms, utterly devoid of a religious burden. Only for them, at this or any stage in the evolution of Jewish national thought, could Eretz Israel be thought of in political terms and viewed through the glass of romantic nationalism, while the Orthodox attitude was set aside. (Bartal 1998: 21)

Indeed, 'Ben-Gurion saw Judaism as the historical misfortune of the Jewish people. For him, it was an obstacle to its transformation into a normal nation' (Leibowitz 1995: 144).

The transformation of the 'language of holiness' into a national vernacular remains to this day a brutal affront to many religious Jews. The Haredim³ recall that, when the Zionists took control of a certain number of religious schools in the 1920s, they contrived, under the pretext of providing teachers with a greater mastery of Hebrew, to introduce Zionist ideas. Hebrew rapidly became the symbol of Zionism and, as a result, many Haredi yeshivas and *hadarim* (elementary schools) continued to offer instruction in Yiddish (some of them even in English) rather than adopt Hebrew as the language of instruction. In truth, for some Haredim, modern Hebrew is nothing more than a 'language created by the Zionists' (Steiner 1996: 37).

Here are a few quotes from a contemporary Haredi critique of the Israeli vernacular:

Modern Hebrew language was invented by the Zionists. Even if they had changed nothing at all of the original Hebrew language, it would be forbidden to speak it, since it was the Zionist heretics who started the practice of speaking it. All the more so now that they have made tremendous changes in the vocabulary, grammar and style of the language. . . . They made it much worse than foreign languages by taking existing words from the *Tenakh* [Hebrew Bible] and other holy sources and giving them totally new meanings. . . . The Brisker Rov⁴ pointed out many other falsifications of the Holy Tongue committed by the Zionists, and his blood would boil with anger whenever he heard someone speak a word or expression of modern Hebrew.⁵

The Hebrew language, which, in principle, should have given Israelis access to the classics of Judaism, has sometimes proved to be a barrier. The secularisation of *leshon hakodesh* began to have an impact when Israelis whose mother tongue is Hebrew attempted to study the Torah. They discovered that their language was not equal to the task, that it would have to be enriched by other words and other concepts. What proved to be most difficult was the re-learning of an entire Judaic vocabulary that had been either separated from its content or transformed by the early Zionists.

³ Haredi, Heb., pl. Haredim, lit. 'strictly observant': common appellation of all traditional Jewish groups; visually distinguishable by a two-colour dress code for men: black and white; often referred to in the media as 'ultra-orthodox'.

⁴ *Brisker Rov* (Yiddish): Rabbi Soloveitchik of Brisk (Bresk-Litovsk), renowned innovator who introduced a new method of Talmudic studies.

⁵ 'Parsha Pearls from the Words of the Gedolim', True Torah Jews, Brooklyn, NY, May 2009 (a weekly internet bulletin).

Modern Hebrew is often of little use to an Israeli who opens the Torah. At a concert in Tel-Aviv to which I had invited a friend living in Israel for thirty years, a member of the country's cultural elite, I found my guest unable to understand a Hebrew song, and offered my services as amateur interpreter. At the end of the song, he asked me how was it that I had been able to translate even before the words had been sung. I explained that the song was based on one of the Psalms of David, which I knew by heart. For him, the words of the Psalms had the resonance of a foreign tongue. It is quite telling that the *Tanakh* (24 books of the Hebrew Bible) has recently been translated into Israeli Hebrew to bridge the gap.

Even the pronunciation of modern Hebrew was a source of considerable irritation to some adversaries of Zionism, an irritation that has continued down to the present day. They accused the Zionists of bastardising the language by lending it an artificial pronunciation corresponding to none of the traditions of Israel (Zimmer 1971: 34–41). Indeed, scholars also remark that modern is 'the lowest common denominator between the two main dialects, Sephardic and Ashkenazi' (Harshav 1993: 164). Ben-Yehuda drew modern Hebrew away from the Ashkenazi accent that disgusted him because he associated it with the exile he knew all too well; he lent it instead the Sephardic inflection which, in his eyes, reflected the exile he knew not and which thus became more acceptable. Abandoning the Ashkenazi accent was to deprive the new language of vital distinctions with respect to both vowels (the diacritical signs, *patah* and *kamatz*, could no longer be distinguished from one another when spoken) and consonants ('tav' is always pronounced the same way, while in Ashkenazi and Yemenite, there may be variations: 't', 'th' or 's'). As a result, the new pronunciation simply overlooked several phonemes used by the different Sephardic communities: for example, the sound 'het', which can no longer be distinguished from 'khaf', the 'ayin' that becomes 'aleph'; those among the 'Orientals' who continued to articulate them were seen as 'primitives'. Only the affirmation of pride in Sephardic identity in the two last decades of the 20th century began to reverse the injustice done to the Sephardim, and their way of speaking the language.

Most anti-Zionists, usually Haredim, refuse to speak Hebrew, and the much more numerous non-Zionists avoid using it. They explain their refusal to speak the Israeli vernacular by way of a more general observation about the State of Israel: 'Rather than sanctifying the profane—which is our principal role in this world—the Zionists profane the sacred'.

Otherwise quite distant from the Haredim, an academic philosopher of Judaism refuses to speak the modern vernacular Hebrew for his own reasons:

Is this the innovative aspect of modern Hebrew in its transposition from the liturgical sphere to the nation-state, that it is used less as a praise of God's presence than as an instrument to project state power? . . . Is 'our' language spoken with such vehemence – the language of power and might – that it marks a return to the Jewish ghetto mentality, now armed with nuclear missiles, a nuclearized ghetto, if you will? (Ellis 2002: 6)

Ironically, while Hebrew has become 'the language of occupation and military vandalism' for some Jews, prominent Palestinian literary figures, such as Anton Shammas and Mahmoud Darwish, refuse to consider it 'a military language'. Palestinians writing in Hebrew challenge 'the Zionist attempts' to appropriate Hebrew as an exclusively Israeli Jewish language', emphasising the often-obscured fact that Palestinian has long been part of the cultural space of Hebrew (Hochberg 2007: 93). Shammas overtly claimed that his choice of Hebrew was an attempt to 'un-Jew the Hebrew language . . . to make it more Israeli and less Jewish, to bring it back to its semantic origins, back to its place' (Hochberg 2007: 77). These Palestinian writers refuse the equation between *ba'al habayit* and *ba'al halashon* (possessor of the house, i.e. of the country, and possessor of the language), which is taken for granted by many a Zionist.

These attempts can be seen as a literary equivalent of the legal action undertaken by a group of Israelis to be recognised as belonging to the Israeli nationality. Israel distinguishes ethnically defined nationality from citizenship. Repeated attempts to be recognised as belonging to Israeli nationality were rejected by Israel's Supreme Court: 'There is no Jewish nation separate from the Jewish people. . . . The Jewish people is composed not only of those residing in Israel but also of Diaspora Jewries' (Rejwan 1999: 45). Thus, the highest court of the land – on explicitly ideological grounds – rejected the idea of a civic rather than ethnic nationality, which has to remain the basis of the Zionist state.

Language and Land

It is well known that Zionist settlers saw Palestine as *terra nullius*. The pre-Zionist population of Palestine, whether Jewish, Muslim or Christian, was at best a part of landscape, at worst a nuisance to get rid of. The idea of separate development that underlies the entire Zionist project manifests itself in the relative neglect of Arabic, the most commonly spoken language in the land, as a competitor to modern Hebrew. Palestine was viewed as 'a culturally virgin soil on which a new national culture could become the definitive, ultimately hegemonic, cultural force of a new metropole' (Sapoznik 2008: 69). Yiddish was seen as a threat because new immigrants from Europe spoke it. Yet, the fact that far more numerous Muslims, Christians and Jews in Palestine spoke Arabic was viewed with

indifference. Zionist settlers, including the most left wing among them, were imbued with the colonial sense of cultural superiority: their East European Zionist culture was assumed to be on 'a higher level' than the local Arab one (Saposnik 2008: 269).

The Ashkenazi origins of modern Hebrew remain alien to Arab Jews. One of them, Albert Swissa, a prominent Israeli writer, considers modern Hebrew 'a completely new invention: a modern, national, and alienating language that has little, if anything, to do with its Jewish origins' (Hochberg 2007: 112). Another Arab Jewish writer, Amram El Maleh, considers that Moroccan Jews underwent 'double colonization . . . that of Morocco by France, and that of Moroccan Jewry by Ashkenazi Israel' (Hochberg 2007: 30).

Hebrew was not a natural choice of a common language. Zionist intellectuals, intent on creating a new Hebrew nation, were divided as to the choice of the language. For example, Theodor Herzl was not quite aware of the extent of the use of modern Hebrew by Zionist settlers in Palestine, and preferred German as the lingua franca of his New Old Land. Moreover, he paid little attention to the role of the language in fostering a new national identity.

The use of German became a *casus belli* several years after Herzl's death. At issue was the language of instruction at the Technion, a technical university founded largely by German Jews, who naturally expected German to be the language of instruction. In the event, the Russian Zionists won out and affirmed the monopoly of modern Hebrew for fostering the new nation. This was the first but not the last victory of Russian Zionists over their German brethren. In spite of their remarkable contributions to Israel's economic, cultural and military successes, German Jews could never compete in the political arena with the far more assertive and resourceful Zionists of Russian and other East European provenances.

Since Zionists viewed Yiddish as the main threat, Israeli regulations made it illegal to establish a Yiddish theatre, publish a daily in the Yiddish language, establish Yiddish schools, and other Yiddish-language institutions. Political and ideological considerations superseded all others. Yiddish had to be combated more vigorously than any other language, for the simple reason that it threatened the hegemony of Hebrew.

Ernest Renan famously remarked that 'the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things'. Zionists followed this dictum, perhaps, more assiduously than other European nationalists. They went about accomplishing consistent work of forgetting a culture that was imbued with reverence for the past. Zionism sought 'to discard diasporic Jewish culture and to obliterate its very existence from collective memory in order to realize its own ideology and vision. The success of the new culture

depended on the suppression of the old one, including its most emblematic element, the Yiddish language' (Chaver 2004: 16–17). When a prominent activist of Yiddish visited Palestine in 1914, he was violently prevented from speaking. And 'it was not simply the impulsive response of hot-headed teenagers, but an act guided by one of the Yishuv's most respected educators and cultural leaders' (Chaver 2004: 19). Zionist authorities falsified census data in the 1920s and 1930s in order to increase the number of Hebrew speakers. The formation of the New Hebrew Man was an act of revolutionary rupture as it implied violent uprooting and transformation while 'in Yiddish we were loved as we were', admitted at the time an active proponent of Hebrew (Chaver 2004: 40).

Yiddish, the language of 'the meek Jew', earned contempt, if not outright hatred. The conventional wisdom of the Jewish Enlightenment held 'that Yiddish was a perverted language, reflecting the perversion of the soul of the Diaspora Jew. The revulsion from it, is a recoil from Diaspora existence, from the Yiddish language – the mother tongue, intimate and hated at the same time, from the parental home of the *shtetl*, corroded by idleness and Jewish trading, and from the irrational and primitive behaviour of the Hasidim' (Harshav 1993: 157). 'For most, the struggle against Yiddish was rooted in a hatred of anything that was connected with the *galut*, considered to be marked by self-deprecation and cringing submission to non-Jews, a culture that was thoroughly second-rate, lacking in any estimable qualities, counterfeit and meretricious'.⁶ The initial Israeli reaction to the Nazi genocide of Jews was also shaped by this image. The millions of victims were considered cowardly, 'inferior human beings that went like lambs to the slaughter' (Porat 1990: 239). This was another example of the Jewish self-hate proper to Zionist ideology.

Old patterns die hard. In post-Soviet Russia, the Jewish Agency for Israel, which subsidises cultural and educational activities in that part of the world, refused to provide funds for Yiddish (as distinguished from Hebrew) schools, this despite the interest still shown in it by Russian Jews, and for a youth organisation that was forced to disband, because of its lack of a proper 'Zionist spirit'. The feud, then, still seems to go on – even if one of the contestants has virtually laid down its arms. 'It is a pathetic and shameful story'.⁷ The victory of Hebrew over Yiddish was not the triumph of one language over another, but rather of an ideology that rejected exile and sought to create a New Hebrew Man.

For Zionism's opponents, the Land of Israel and the Hebrew language are not 'national treasures', as the founders of Zionism assert, in line with the European nationalists of the 19th century. They affirm that the

6 Abraham Brumberg, 'Yiddish and Hebrew – End of a Feud?' <http://www.haruth.com/YiddishHebrew.html> (accessed 15 May 2010).

7 Abraham Brumberg, 'Yiddish and Hebrew – End of a Feud?' <http://www.haruth.com/YiddishHebrew.html> (accessed 14 May 2009).

neologism *moledet*, ‘motherland’, represents an imitation that undermines the very foundations of Judaism. The earliest Zionists saw the Land of Israel just as did the Russian romantics, with their earthy vision of Mother Russia. This concept was quite alien to Arab Jews brought to Israel in the early years of the state of Israel. The dozens of Russian songs translated into Hebrew in the first decades of Zionist settlement were to instill the love of the *moledet* in the new arrivals. The ‘motherland’ was so named because she would always welcome her prodigal sons for whom her love was generous, unconditional and natural. The mother is the ultimate refuge, and, in fact, the State of Israel has often been presented as the ultimate place of refuge, the Jews’ ultimate assurance of security. But this romantic image is quite foreign to Jewish tradition in general and to non-Ashkenazi Jews in particular. This is well illustrated by the puzzlement of a Moroccan Jewish youth trying to decode the meaning of *sefer-moledet*, the homeland textbook given to him at school (Hochberg 2007: 113–114). Though the Land of Israel is indeed described once as ‘mother’ in the Talmud, Jewish tradition did not take it up⁸, and left it anchored in its original context, which makes no reference to settlement in the Land of Israel.⁹

According to the Pentateuch, the Jews, or, more precisely, the children of Israel, did not originate in the Land of Israel. They appear for the first time as a people in exile, in Egypt. They were then granted recognition as a people at Mount Sinai when they accepted the Torah, the act that distinguishes them from all other peoples. ‘Promised Land’ can thus be understood as not belonging to those who have received the promise, but to Him who has given it. A classic commentary on the first verse of the Pentateuch clearly illustrates the point: the Torah begins with the story of creation, in affirmation that the entire world, including the Land of Israel, belongs but to God Himself (Leviticus 25:23). Tradition defines the relationship to the Land in explicitly conditional terms.

A portion of the prayer *Shema Israel*, which the Jews recite thrice daily, is a good example of their conditional relationship to the Land:

And it will come to pass that if you continually hearken to My commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him, with all your heart and with all your soul—then I will

⁸ *Jerusalem Talmud*, Berakhot, 2:8 contains one reference to the Land of Israel as mother: ‘The mother of a man degrades him while the wife of his father honors him: where should he turn?’ The story told is of a rabbi badly treated in Israel but highly respected in Babylon. Despite its ironic context, this reference is used in the Hebrew title (*Em Habanin Smecha*, ‘The Mother of the Children is Happy’) of a passionate plea composed during the Shoah (Teichtal, 1999: 33–36 and 192–203). It pleads to ‘leave the land of exile and return to the bosom of the mother that is Eretz Israel’ (p. 229).

⁹ ‘... for us, Eretz Israel is not a homeland ... It is inconceivable that the simple possession of the Land of Israel might make of us a nation’, stated Rabbi Wasserman, quoted in Sorasky (1996: 224).

provide rain for your land in its proper time, the early and the late rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. I will provide grass in your field for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied. Beware lest your heart be seduced and you turn astray and serve gods of others and bow to them. Then the wrath of the Lord will blaze against you. He will restrain the heaven so there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce. And you will swiftly be banished from the goodly land which the Lord gives you. (ArtScroll Siddur, 93)

The relationship has often been compared to a married couple: it lasts as long as the spouses obey certain rules. Failing that, divorce ensues. The term *moledet* eliminates the subtle sensitivity with which Jewish tradition relates to the Land of Israel.

At the same time, modern Hebrew has become an important marker of identity for Jews in many countries, even though most of them are not able to speak it. The centrality of Israel, which has been the policy of Zionist educators for several decades, created a new collective memory, in which modern Hebrew takes a place of pride. Many Jews have come to perceive themselves as part of ‘the Israeli Diaspora’, like descendants of Italian immigrants feel part of the Italian Diaspora. This transformation of collective memory is truly impressive. While the Italian ancestor left Italy in early 20th century, liked to eat pasta, and spoke Italian, his Jewish counterpart most probably left Russia, liked to eat gefilte fish and spoke Yiddish. It takes considerable imagination to turn that ancestor into someone who came from Israel, ate falafel, and spoke modern Hebrew.

Revival or Invention?

The emergence of modern Hebrew as the vernacular of the Zionist settlers and, later, of Israeli society, is often portrayed as a ‘miraculous rebirth’. It is directly related to the history of Zionism and is a fascinating expression of a nationalist revolution. One gets a sense of the ideological tension fomenting the cultural revolution in Zionist circles in Palestine from a published appeal addressed to the graduating class of the Hebrew Gymnasium in Tel Aviv in 1915:

A choice of two paths stands before us: Either a complete transvaluation of values in every aspect of our lives—and national rebirth; or continued traversal of the tried and beaten path—and national death. . . . Your time has come to make this choice—and may you choose the path of life. (Saposnik 2008: 252)

Unlike Lithuanian or Ukrainian nationalists, Zionists could not rely on a language spoken by the group of people they were determined to shape into a modern nation. Many doubted altogether, and some maintain this doubt to this day, that Jews constitute an ethnic entity, let

alone a nation (Sand 2008). They spoke – and continue to speak – different languages, some specifically Jewish, others – ambient vernaculars. Some scholars believe that the Israeli vernacular owes more to the written Hebrew of the 19th century *maskilim* than to the ancient tongue of the Hebrews (Kuzar 2001). They argue that it was not the ancient Hebrew that was revived but, rather, a more recent variety of Hebrew that is the basis of the Israel vernacular. Indeed, the role of Hebrew-writing (rather than Hebrew-speaking) intellectuals in developing the vernacular seems to support the claim that the new spoken language emerged from the written developed only a few decades earlier.

This view is hardly apolitical as it dovetails with the post-Zionist trend in Israeli society. Discontinuity is emphasised both with respect to the language and to the nation. Just as ‘the Jewish people’ is a nation imagined by the Zionists, modern Hebrew is an artificial language created in order to give a vernacular to this imagined nation. This was an extraordinary triumph of the will but it gave a language to the inhabitants of Israel, not to the majority of Jews who choose to stay away from the Middle East. On the other hand, to call this language Israeli (Zuckerman 2009) suggests that it belongs to all those who live in Israel, irrespective of their faith or ethnic origin. This parallels the above mentioned attempt by several Israelis to be recognised by the government as belonging to ‘the Israeli nationality’. In Israel, nationality is distinct from citizenship, this is why Israeli would mean the new cultural entity created in Israel. While the Israeli government officially recognises over one hundred different nationalities, it steadfastly refuses to accept the Israeli nationality. The myth of the New Hebrew Nation descending from the biblical Hebrew, and that of the language they speak that descends, too, from the tongue of the Bible, constitute important pillars of the Zionist worldview.

The image of Hebrew as a resurrected language also plays an important role in building up the legitimacy of the Zionist state among Christians: ‘the biblical connection with the language would substantiate the image of antiquity so crucial to modern nationalism’, even though ‘the correlation of Hebrew with the idealized values of a specific historical period was at least in part artificial’ (Chaver 2004: 12). Indeed, it was not Hebrew but Aramaic that was spoken in Palestine at the time of Jesus.

Those who left the Zionist ideology behind usually do not subscribe to the revivalist doctrine of modern Hebrew and consider the Israeli vernacular as a normal language, whose native speakers need not be ‘instructed’ by scholars intent on reviving the old idiom. Some argue that the Israeli, rather than Hebrew, language not only does not descend from the Holy Writ, but also is hardly a Semitic language at all. It was created by those whose native tongues were Yiddish, Russian or Polish, and they grafted Hebrew words onto the syntax of those languages (Zuckerman

2009). ‘The Israeli’ may be Hebrew to the same extent that English can be considered to descend from Latin because the English vocabulary is replete with French words. Some Israeli linguists suggest that the formation of modern Israeli Hebrew is similar to that of various Creole languages in the world.

This emphasis on commonalities, rather than the uniqueness of modern Hebrew, resonates with similar attempts, mostly made by Israeli intellectuals, to question the exceptionalism that is part of the Zionist ideology and Israel’s legitimacy. The uniqueness of modern Hebrew is challenged in the same breath as that of the Nazi genocide, of anti-Semitism, and of Jewish history *tout court*. The story of modern Hebrew is another facet of the historical debate about the place of Zionism and the state of Israel in world history.

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