

VI. HEBREW IN THE DIASPORA

The speaking of Hebrew ceased about 200 C.E. (middle of the last century of the 4th millennium from the Creation). Since 1881 Hebrew again became a language spoken by the people. For 1,700 years the language was in "exile," just as the Jewish people were in exile. The language, like the nation, was unable to enjoy a normal life, but like the nation, it continued to be strong and healthy in spite of its restricted conditions of life.

During all this long time, Hebrew remained the language of prayer and the language in which the Bible was read. Judaism requires every male Jew to pray three times every day, to read every week the portion of the Pentateuch, twice in Hebrew and once in the Aramaic Targum Onkelos; in the Middle Ages it was also customary to read it with a commentary. Every Jew was also expected to learn the Law, which meant reading regularly in the Mishnah, or in the Midrashim, or—if one's Jewish education was sufficiently high—in the Talmud (which for the most part is in Aramaic). These religious duties brought it about that practically every Jew could read and write Hebrew. Literacy was rather rare in the Middle Ages among other nations, as it was rare until recently among most Eastern peoples; but the Jews were different. Many Jews—at times the majority—were unable to read the language of the country in which they dwelt, but they all could read Hebrew. Moreover a considerable part of the Jewish population could express their thoughts in Hebrew. Those who were granted the gift of poetry, could write poems in Hebrew. Thus a very extensive Hebrew literature was produced in the period of the Diaspora, by no means quantitatively inferior to the literary activity of other nations in that time. This literature found its readers amongst the Jewish public, and

the books passed from hand to hand and from country to country.

Not all that Jews wrote, they wrote in Hebrew. In the times of the Mishnah, there was a Greek Jewish literature, and in the Middle Ages a considerable Jewish literature in Arabic. In more recent centuries, there were also Jewish literatures in the languages of the countries in which the Jews lived, particularly in Italian and German, and lately in English. It can be stated as a general rule, however, that only those works that were translated into Hebrew remained over the centuries the common property of the Jewish people.

The one exception to that rule is the Aramaic language. It resembles Hebrew very closely, and a person who knows Hebrew can, with little effort, learn to read it. Already parts of the Biblical books of Ezra and Daniel are written in Aramaic, and most of the Bible was subsequently translated into it; these *Targumim* are still studied in traditional Jewish society. In Aramaic are both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud, as well as the *Zohar*, the basic work of the Kabbalah. It is the language of popular prayers, especially the *Kaddish*, and prayers and religious poems were written in it even in comparatively recent times, such as *Yah ribbon* by Rabbi Israel Najara (1542-1619), which is included among the Sabbath *Zemirot* (table chants). Aramaic is a sort of second language of the Jews. Books written in it were no less popular for that matter than the Hebrew ones. These Aramaic compositions of the middle ages, however, were either literary tours de force (like Najara's) or were couched in Aramaic for special reasons, like the *Zohar*. When Jews wrote ordinarily, they employed Hebrew, though that Hebrew might be mingled with Talmudic Aramaic.

The position of Hebrew among Jews in the Middle Ages resembled that of Latin among Christians in Western Europe, of Greek among Eastern Christians, classical Arabic amongst Muslims, or Sanskrit in India in the middle ages. Each of these languages served almost exclusively for every written use, but not for everyday speech. On the other hand it was not common

for the spoken language to be used in writing (except for some countries, e.g. England, where the spoken language was written alongside one of the major literary languages). Thus also among the Jews it was customary to write Hebrew, but to speak different languages, according to whatever country one happened to live in. Just as the non-Jews saw nothing wrong with this use of two languages, and made no attempt to introduce Latin or classical Arabic into the speech of the street or the family, so the Jews of the time found it sufficient to write Hebrew, and felt no urge to speak it. They did indeed speak it sometimes, on the Sabbath, or when they desired not to be understood by gentile bystanders, or with Jews from other countries; but this ability to speak occasional Hebrew did not move them to any attempt to speak Hebrew at all times. "The Holy Tongue" and the language of everyday life were kept separate.

Such a state of affairs where two distinct languages are used simultaneously for different purposes in the life of one and the same society, is called in modern research diglossia. The phenomenon is still widespread, and has been thoroughly studied in recent times.