

X. THE LANGUAGE REVIVAL

The exclusive use of Biblical Hebrew in the Haskalah period, though the result of historical circumstances, was just what that age needed. For communication, the European Jew had Yiddish or a European language; for his emotional needs, the Maskil had Hebrew. The beauty of Biblical Hebrew gave him the aesthetic satisfaction which was missing in his environment, and which Haskalah literature had taught him to demand. Its numerous grammatical rules reassured him that Jews, too, had a well-regulated, civilized language (Yiddish was thought to be grammarless). The fact that the source of his language was a book which often could be interpreted in different ways, provided plenty of opportunity for the Maskil to exercise that faculty of intellectual fastidiousness so deeply implanted in the Jewish character since the Middle Ages, and served as a sort of substitute for the study of Talmud or Kabbalah. It should be noted that Haskalah literature not only laid a foundation for Zionism by its Biblical themes (which provoked yearning for a free and complete national life) but also prepared the ground for the revival of Hebrew as an everyday language by working the available means of expression of Biblical Hebrew to the utmost limit and adapting them to be used as a vehicle for the thought of their time and ours. It was precisely the successful accomplishment of these two preparatory tasks that hastened its end. Neither the literary forms and content nor the language of Haskalah Hebrew could in the end satisfy the needs it had cultivated in the minds of its readers. Part of the success of the Haskalah movement was that many Jews, while remaining true to Judaism, acquired a solid knowledge of the rapidly evolving European thought of their time. They thus became accustomed

to ways of thinking which Haskalah writing was unable to express with the means at its disposal.

Of course the gap between the language of the Haskalah and the requirements of contemporary thinking was biggest in the field of political and social discussion—yet this insufficiency revealed itself most dramatically in artistic narrative prose. One of the results of the revolution in European political and social thought was the call for realism in fiction: narrative prose had to represent life as it was—and of course particularly the problematic and unpleasant aspects of life—and this included a faithful representation of the language of its characters. When in 1857–1860 Kalman Shulman translated the realistic French novel *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, he employed limpid Biblical Hebrew to report the speech of the underworld—apparently without his Hebrew readers finding anything wrong with this. In 1857–1864 Abraham Mapu published his realistic novel *The Hypocrite* and introduced some measure of linguistic realism in that the characters who “rebelled against the light,” the opponents of Haskalah, speak with an admixture of elements from the language of the Mishnah and Talmud. What was Mapu’s purpose in putting Mishnaic Hebrew into their mouth? For him, evidently, the idiom of the Talmud was a sort of literary image of Yiddish speech. Now, one of the characteristics of the Haskalah was its opposition to Yiddish, as a symptom of the sorry state of Jewry. Many Maskilim spoke (at least in public) Russian or German, and this habit seems to be represented in the book by the Biblical speech of the Maskil characters. Two features fitted Mishnaic Hebrew to serve as a suitable image for Yiddish: the Hebrew element in Yiddish consists mainly of Hebrew and Aramaic words from Talmud and Midrash, and thus these words, when inserted in a modern context, reminded the reader of the sound of Yiddish; and since all grammars of the time (except a few little-known scientific books) dealt with Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew was visualized as a “language with no grammar,” as Yiddish was believed to be.

Shulman’s and Mapu’s roots lay in the romantic stage of the Haskalah. Shalom Jacob Abramowich, better known by his

pen-name *Mendele Moicher Seforim* (Mendele the bookseller), was all of the new age. Amongst his publications, a prominent place is occupied by translations of books on Chemistry (1862), Zoology (Lenz's *Natural History*, 3 volumes, 1862-1872), and Russian history (1867). His first story, *Learn ye to do good*, which was in fact the first part of his great novel *Fathers and Sons*, appeared in 1862. It was a realistic story (as the term was then understood), but both narrative and dialogue were couched in Biblical Hebrew, with only a slight admixture of post-Biblical elements. The result did not satisfy the 25-year-old author, whose literary taste was already shaped by the new period, which demanded artistic truth above all, and he felt the absurdity of types from the Jewish Pale of Settlement expressing their modern sentiments in fragments of verses from the Prophets. We should note that it was not the archaic form of the language that offended the taste of people in the second half of the 19th century (there being as yet no living spoken Hebrew), but the strong link that Haskalah literature had established between Biblical Hebrew and the Biblical heroes of its stories and poems. Abramowich buried away the remainder of the novel, and only proceeded to publish it in full after the brilliant success of the Russian version (translated from the Hebrew manuscript) by L. Bienstock, published in 1868. In the same year, *Fathers and Sons* appeared in Hebrew. This, however, was after Abramowich had turned his back on Hebrew fiction.

After one year's silence there appeared in the periodical *Kol Mevasser* Abramowich's first Yiddish story, *The Little Man*. The author used the pseudonym "Mendele the Bookseller," thus identifying himself as that well-known figure in the Pale of Settlement, the itinerant seller of religious books who visited the villages with his horse and wagon. In the same year he published a small book, *The Magic Ring*, a pretended translation from the German, in Yiddish with full pointing. During the following twenty years Mendele published many stories in Yiddish, thus giving a fillip to Yiddish literature, which soon advanced from a popular literature for the uneducated to the

status of one of Europe's great literatures. His Yiddish stories are realistic with a pronounced satirical tone, and their language faithfully represents the speech of the Jewish masses, albeit in an artistic stylization. Mendele by no means ceased writing Hebrew. He continued with his scientific translations and contributed topical articles and letters to the Hebrew press. Only in his stories had he switched languages. But he evidently remained unhappy about having abandoned Hebrew. In 1878 he completed the publication of one of his major Yiddish works, *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, and this was followed by a protracted interruption in his literary productivity—caused also by personal troubles—until he came out in 1884 with a Yiddish play, *The Call-Up* (to military service). A year later he began to publish in the newly founded Hebrew daily paper *Hayom* a Hebrew story, *In the Secret Place of Thunder* (Psalm 81:8).

The Hebrew language in this story is in vivid contrast to the language of the Haskalah. Instead of reproducing the features of the language of one definite period, he used a free mixture of elements from different periods. The basis is Biblical, but to it are added words, idioms and grammatical forms from the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrashim, both for concepts that are missing in Biblical Hebrew, and for the purpose of stylistic and connotative variation. This idiom was immediately adopted by his contemporaries. Mendele himself continued to write in this kind of Hebrew, and translated into it some of his earlier Yiddish works. True, he did not give up writing Yiddish, but from now on his main writings were in Hebrew. They constitute a large body of high literary quality, in which many see the beginnings of modern Hebrew literature. Almost at once, however, others began to employ this mixed, "synthetic" Hebrew, not only in prose but—from Bialik's first poem onwards—in poetry too. Apart from the Paris orientalist Joseph Halévy (1827–1917), who waged a stubborn campaign to revive Hebrew on the basis of the Bible alone, everyone accepted as a matter of course the principle that in writing Hebrew one may draw on linguistic materials from all sources of the language. This is the principle

that lies at the base of the Hebrew used in our own time, although some philologists (such as Joseph Klausner, 1874–1958) have advocated giving more prominence to the Mishnaic elements, and there exists a widely held belief that Biblical and Mishnaic elements must not be brought into close structural contact in writing (this is called “the language of Diverse Kinds”—cf. Leviticus 19:19). In actual practice, the different elements are mixed both in speaking and writing to such an extent that they cannot be disentangled. Today we do not have the same mixture as we find in Mendele, nor is the mixture the same in all cases: common to all, however, is the possibility to choose a word or a form not because it originates from a certain type of source literature but solely for its suitability to express the idea it is meant to express. The addition of the Mishnaic vocabulary meant a substantial increase in the means of expression: to somewhat less than 8,000 Biblical Hebrew words, about 14,000 from Mishnaic Hebrew were added. In later stages this complex was further increased by words from medieval sources, ranging from the Piyyut down to the 18th century. Of no less importance is the fact that, as long as the Biblical language was faithfully adhered to, new words were not created. New concepts were expressed by combining existing Biblical words. Now these restrictions were lifted, and users of Hebrew returned to the medieval habit of creating any necessary new words from Hebrew and even from Aramaic roots.

Mendele himself never enlarged upon the causes that led him to return to writing in Hebrew in his fiction. We may hazard a guess that not only regrets at having abandoned “the Tongue of Eber” moved him, but also the reversal in the fortunes of Russian Jewry. In the days of the liberal Czar Alexander II (reigned 1855–1881), certain rights were granted to Jewish businessmen and members of the free professions, and there was strong hope that the legal position of Jews in general would gradually improve. The assassination of the liberal Czar brought to the throne his son Alexander III, a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary and Jew-hater (1881–1894). One month after his accession, in the Easter days of 1881, pogroms broke out in south-

ern Russia, probably with the knowledge and encouragement of the government; at any rate the Czar's government encouraged the wave of mass emigration of Jews, which started in the wake of the pogroms and over the years caused the centre of world Jewry to shift to the American continent, Western Europe, and South Africa. One of the results of this shock was a lively discussion of the future of the Jews, carried on mainly in Hebrew, and leading to the establishment of new periodical publications and in 1885 also of two Hebrew daily papers in Russia. Mendele's first story in his second Hebrew period was published in one of these daily papers, and we may not be far off the mark if we take this to be one of the many diverse manifestations of the national spirit among Russian Jews. The same spirit also led some of the emigrants, mainly young intellectuals, to go to Palestine (then part of the Turkish Empire). These men and women went forth with a strong determination to make a new life for themselves, unlike anything that had been in Russia, and were open to every innovation that would remove them further from assimilation to Europe and bring them closer to a culturally autonomous Jewish existence. With these young people cut off completely from their home background, there existed the possibility—so rare in human history—of starting afresh. The new beginning was imbued with the will for a better society (socialism and related ideologies) and with European ideas of nationalism, which had penetrated into Russia only during the seventies, as a result of the Bulgarian War of Independence.

That spirit of European nationalism was the cause of revolutionary changes in the mind of a young Russian Jew even before the great turning-point in the destiny of Russian Jewry. Eliezer Ben Yehuda (Perelman) was born in 1858 in the small town of Luzhki in northern Russia, to an orthodox family. He was sent to Yeshiva, but was expelled, by his own account, because he was discovered reading a Hebrew grammar by Shelomo Zelman Hanau (17th century)! In this way he became a Maskil, and studied for the Matriculation Examination at the Gymnasium of Dünaburg (Dwinsk, in Latvia), where he became acquainted with the national idea. In 1878 he began to study

medicine in Paris, with the idea of preparing himself for emigration to Palestine. At that time there were many political exiles from Eastern Europe in Paris, and in conversations with these he worked out in detail the idea of a Jewish nationalism. In the beginning of 1879 he formulated his views in an article entitled *A Burning Question*. He submitted it to *Hamaggid*, one of the most widely read periodicals in Russia, but the editor returned the manuscript with the remark that the article was not fit to be printed. He submitted the article again, this time to Peretz Smolenskin, editor of *Hashahar*, which was published in Vienna for Hebrew readers in Russia. Smolenskin was more enlightened: he accepted Ben Yehuda's article for publication, demanding only that its title should be reworded *An Important Question*, and stating his objections to Ben Yehuda's views in a note of his own. The article appeared almost exactly two years before the pogroms. In it, Ben Yehuda develops a theory of Jewish nationalism (he invented the Hebrew word) stressing the need for a large-scale Jewish settlement in Palestine—not to save the nation and restore its dignity (it seems that even he did not yet dare to say so in so many words), but to save Hebrew literature! In keeping with the European view of nationalism, which considered language the main sign of national identity, he argues against those who deny the existence of a Jewish nation: "We have a language in which we can even now write whatever we wish, and we have also the possibility to speak it if we only want." After the realization of his settlement plan, "Palestine will be the centre for the whole nation, and those who live abroad will also know that their nation dwells in its own land, for there it has its language and literature; the language, too, will flourish: many writers will arise in its literature, because there the literature will be able to support those who write it and become their regular profession, as is the literature of all other nations."

In this article we find stated for the first time the connection between Jewish national revival and Hebrew speech. Ben Yehuda realized with his sound instinct that in a modern nation there was no room for diglossia, the use of different languages side

by side for different requirements of social life, and that the Jewish people must pass through the stage the European nations had gone through hundreds of years earlier, when they gave up Latin and began employing their spoken language for purposes for which Latin had formerly served. The unique aspect of Ben Yehuda's enterprise was that until then all diglossia situations had been ended by enlarging the sphere of the spoken language to take over the position of written language as well, while in this case the written language enlarged its sphere to include the spoken activities. The difference was necessitated by the state of the Jewish nation: at that time the written Hebrew language was the unifying factor and the spoken languages the divisive force. As soon as one starts thinking of a national solution for the Jewish problem, there automatically arises the necessity for a common language in which life in the common homeland can be carried on. Ben Yehuda's genius lay in recognizing that this had to be Hebrew, the language which enshrines all the historical memories of the people, and the only one on which all its sections can agree.

His idea was slow in gaining the assent of the leaders of the nation. Almost all the Hebrew writers of the time, including Mendele, rejected the idea of reviving Hebrew in speech; as late as 1895 Herzl wrote in his *Judenstaat* that there could be no question of having Hebrew as the language of the state, because the people did not know it: "Who amongst us knows enough Hebrew to buy a railway ticket in it?" The Zionist Organization for many years ignored the role of Hebrew as a national language. Even Yehiel Michel Pines of Jerusalem, who afterwards became Ben Yehuda's faithful collaborator, called the idea of reviving spoken Hebrew *ein frommer Wunsch*, "a pious hope" with little chance of realization. Ben Yehuda, however, began immediately to realize the idea in his own personal life. In the preface to his great dictionary, he tells us how he spoke Hebrew for the first time in a Paris café, and how strange he felt as "the mysterious sounds of this ancient, dead Eastern language mingled with the gay tones of the living, beautiful, rich French tongue..." The other party to that conversation was

perhaps M. Zundelman, a teacher from Palestine, from whom Ben Yehuda learnt that in Palestine Hebrew was used as a medium of transactions in the market place between people from different Jewish communities, as well as about the Sephardic pronunciation used for speaking it.

When in 1881 Ben Yehuda arrived in Palestine, he found it possible to speak Hebrew, for many people could speak it for limited purposes. But Ben Yehuda set about voicing a demand utterly different from this occasional Hebrew speaking. He insisted that people should speak only Hebrew, in their home with their families as well—in other words, that the state of diglossia must stop. This demand met complete lack of understanding on the part of the public. He did indeed impose a Hebrew regime on his own home: with his wife, whom he had married on the journey from France to Palestine, he spoke Hebrew exclusively, although her knowledge of it at the time was still very slight, and when his son was born in 1882, he brought him up in Hebrew, and Hebrew only. This meant that he had to forbid the boy's mother to speak to him (he had found a Hebrew-speaking nurse). His friend Y. M. Pines warned him that the child would grow up an idiot!

No research has yet been undertaken to find out to what extent the habit of occasional Hebrew speaking furthered the gradual acceptance of Hebrew as an all-purpose idiom of communication: there is reason to believe that in the Sephardi communities there was such a gradual transition. But the lack of success of Ben Yehuda's demands is highlighted by the information, confirmed by different sources, that in 1902, twenty years later, there were only ten families in Jerusalem who spoke Hebrew at home.

The idea of Ben Yehuda which finally brought the desired results was to introduce Hebrew as the language of instruction in schools. Of course Hebrew was studied in the Palestinian schools as the language of the books read, but the instruction took place in the language of that particular community or in a European language, and the Hebrew texts were translated into it in class. Ben Yehuda started teaching "Hebrew through Heb-

rew" at the school of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. An experiment in the same direction had been carried out there before by Nissim Behar, but without the ideological foundation of nationalism. Ben Yehuda was after a short time forced to stop teaching because of his ill health, and henceforth dedicated himself to the work of bringing out his newspaper, in which he continued to make propaganda for the introduction of Hebrew as the language of the schools.

At this juncture there arrived in Palestine the Bilu¹ group, who were the élite of the First Aliya and ideologically the group with the clearest national consciousness. While still in Russia, they read in Ben Yehuda's newspaper of his struggle, and expressed by letter their agreement with the idea of reviving the language. On their arrival in the country, Ben Yehuda welcomed them with an article entitled *Citizens, not Strangers*. They adopted the idea of introducing Hebrew as the language of conversation and instruction in the school. When the first "colonies" were founded, efforts were made to establish Hebrew in the schools there as language of instruction, and as early as 1890 we are told that in all the colonies in Galilee the teachers were teaching Hebrew through Hebrew. There were many difficulties, and not everywhere was Hebrew successfully kept going as the sole language of instruction, especially as the settlers were dependent on support from Jewish organizations from abroad for the upkeep of their institutions, and these tended to infiltrate the language of their own country into the schools maintained by them. On the whole, however, a system of Hebrew schools was taking shape, strengthened by the founding of kindergartens (from 1898 onwards) and high schools. The Herzliya Gymnasium of Tel Aviv was founded in 1906 and the Hebrew Gymnasium of Jerusalem in 1908. It should be remembered that the first Hebrew teachers were not trained teachers, had no Hebrew textbooks, and on top of this had to teach in a language which they themselves did not know perfectly, and in which many words were still lacking.

¹ Abbreviation of "O house of Jacob, let us depart and go," Isaiah 2:5.

he lack of words was much felt at the beginning of the 19th Period. As long as Hebrew was something of a luxury, a speaker could refrain from mentioning something for which he did not know the Hebrew word, or could circumscribe it in several words, or even simply use the foreign word. But someone who used Hebrew for everyday speech required a short and exact Hebrew word for everything, and the better Hebrew became established in the speaking habits of teachers and pupils, the greater was the need for words. Part of the shortage could be supplied by searching through the source works of the language, in particular the Talmud. Many words which before the period of spoken Hebrew had seemed to be of no relevance, were now discovered to be extremely useful, and could with small shifts of meaning be adapted for the use of the Hebrew speaker in Palestine. Ben Yehuda personally shouldered this task: in 1903 he published a smaller dictionary, and from 1908 onwards began to print his great *Thesaurus Totius Hebraeitis* ("Treasury of the entire Hebrew language"), based on research in hundreds of books from all periods of the language. After his death the Dictionary was carried on by the late M. Z. Segal and for its largest part by N. H. Tur-Sinai, until it was complete in 16 volumes and almost 8,000 pages in 1958. This Dictionary, too, is still a long way from exhausting all that can be got out of the literature of former generations for re-use in our time. More recent dictionaries have added a great deal, and the Hebrew Language Academy is currently engaged in producing a comprehensive Academic Dictionary, under the direction of Z. Ben-Hayyim, where ultimately it will be possible to find all words that ever existed in Hebrew. Yet there are many new inventions and concepts for which we can hardly expect to find an expression in the language of the sources, and here there was, and still is, a need to create new words. Ben Yehuda was an assiduous inventor of words, and many of the most ordinary words in our speech today, such as the words for dictionary, newspaper, watch, fashion, towel, are his creations.²

² מילון, עיתון, שיעור, אופנה, מגבת.

Between 1900 and 1910 young couples began to enter into matrimony who had gone through the Hebrew school and whose Hebrew speech was fluent and natural. At that time were born the first children in families who spoke nothing but Hebrew in the home, and those babies grew up in Hebrew without anyone making a special effort to assure this. They were the first people, after a lapse of 1,700 years, who knew no language but Hebrew.

Hebrew was once more a living language.