

XI. THE NEW LIFE OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

In the previous chapter we saw how the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, started on ideological grounds under the inspiration of European-style nationalism, was put into practice by the schools. The Second Aliyah (1904–1915) brought from Eastern Europe young people steeped in the teachings of progressive nationalism. With their arrival, Hebrew became increasingly prominent in public life and in the streets of the Jewish sector of Palestine. The cultural life of the different Jewish communities continued along lines more or less parallel to what it had been in their countries of origin. In economic activity, too, there had not yet taken place that far-reaching revolution which led to the present cleavage between the social structure of the Yishuv and that of all Jewish communities abroad. Apart from the feeling of having fulfilled national destiny—which at that time had not yet assumed clear-cut political patterns—the outstanding distinguishing feature of the Palestinian Yishuv was their Hebrew speech, whether as a partial reality or as an ideal to be realized in the near future. When the Zionist Organization made in 1916–18 a census of the Jewish population of Palestine, 34,000 people, 40% of the 85,000 who then made up Palestine's Jewry, stated that Hebrew was their main language. This impressive achievement becomes even more significant if we go into details: amongst younger people the percentage was 50% and amongst the younger people of Tel Aviv and the agricultural colonies (where the new Yishuv was concentrated) it was 75%.¹ These figures do not include Jeru-

¹ Cf. R. Bachi, "A Statistical Analysis of the Revival of Hebrew in Israel," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* III (1956), 179–247.

salem (where the language question was not asked), nor do they include, of course, those recent immigrants who had left Palestine at the beginning of the war, most of whom no doubt were Hebrew speakers.

Throughout this period the school remained the focus of the Hebrew revival, and it was there that the first national struggle of the Yishuv, the "Language War," took place. A German-Jewish charitable organization for the advancement of Jews in backward countries, the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden (in Palestine commonly known at the time as "Ezrah"), was maintaining a number of schools in Palestinian cities, including a teachers' training college in Jerusalem. The language of instruction in these was Hebrew, but like other bodies of its type, the Hilfsverein considered it its task to spread the knowledge of a European language of culture and civilization, in this case German. The constant encroachments of German in the curriculum aroused opposition, particularly among the students of the teachers' training college. Tension reached its height in 1913, when the Hilfsverein, planning to set up a technical high school in Haifa, announced that all subjects in the "Technikum" would be taught in German, since Hebrew was not yet sufficiently developed for the needs of the exact sciences. The young teachers, together with their pupils, marched out of the organization's schools. The World Zionist Organization, which until then had paid no more than lip service to the Hebrew language, went into action, and in the end the establishment of the technical institution was foiled. The Jewish population of Palestine acted on this occasion according to the patterns of national struggle, and we shall hardly go wrong if we consider the Language War episode as the first proof that indeed there had come into being in Palestine a modern Jewish nation, on a predominantly linguistic basis.

One of the most important internal developments in the history of Hebrew at that time is also connected with the schools. This is the establishment of a supreme central institution for determining the direction in which the language was to develop, or, as we would say today, for language planning.

In the year 1889/90 a "Language Committee" (now usually translated "Language Council") was formed in Jerusalem. Its members were Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1858–1922), David Yellin (1864–1941), Chaim Hirschensohn (1857–1935), and Abraham Moses Luncz (1854–1918). All were of Ben Yehuda's own generation. Two of them, Yellin and Hirschensohn, were born in Palestine. The committee was closely linked with the "Safah Berurah" society, founded shortly before. The aim of both bodies was "to extend the use of the Hebrew language and of spoken Hebrew among all sections of the people." This committee was active for a few months only, and we have no direct information about the subjects of its deliberations or about its resolutions. From a brief account given in 1912 in the first number of the "Minutes of the Language Council," we learn that "The meetings of that Committee dealt with terms for the most necessary concepts . . . and with establishing correct standards of pronunciation." ²

As stated above, the Committee soon ceased its activities, and precisely during the years in which Hebrew was establishing itself in the life of the Yishuv, there was no official central body to direct it. The controlling and stimulating forces at that time emanated from the schools, or rather from the teachers, each teacher going his own way in these matters. A number of teachers also engaged in writing. Although under ordinary circumstances this would be a normal situation, in the special situation of the Hebrew language, still in process of regeneration, it led to a feeling of insecurity. Particular objection was taken to different words for the same object or idea, which were invented and introduced in different localities. In those years we witness the growing influence of David Yellin, an educator of strong convictions, who passionately believed that language should be controlled. The "Land of Israel Convention" at Zikhron Yaakov

² *Zikhronot Va'ad ha-Lashon* I, 3; also *Leqeṭ Te'udot le-Toldot Va'ad ha-Lashon . . .*, Jerusalem, 1970. Cf. further R. Sivan, *Leshonenu La'am* 204/5 (the popular periodical of the Language Academy). S. Eisenstadt, *Sefatenu ha-Ivrit ha-Hayah*, Tel Aviv, 1967, deals mainly with the organizational aspects of the Language Council's history.

in 1903 created the Teachers' Association, which united all Hebrew teachers of Palestine, and also resolved to re-establish the Language Council. The Council was set up at the first conference of the Teachers' Association, in the autumn of 1903, and met for the first time in the winter of 1904/5, under the joint chairmanship of Ben Yehuda and Yellin. From its inception, the Council was flooded with letters from teachers all over the country, asking its opinion on terminology they had introduced. The Council published in due course a list of terminology in arithmetic for elementary schools. By doing so, it initiated the characteristic procedure of the Language Council (and later on of the Language Academy), namely, to deal with terminology for whole subjects, finishing each subject before proceeding to the next. This method avoids haphazard innovations and assures a terminology fitted to the requirements of its users.³

Yellin's authority was to no small extent due to the fact that it was he who had popularized through his book *Le-fi ha-taf* (Warsaw, 1900; cf. Gen. 47:12), the system of "Hebrew through Hebrew." Though this system had its roots in contemporary European educational theory,⁴ it became inseparable from the process of spreading spoken Hebrew among the Jewish people, and reached its peak in the methods of the Ulpan in the 1950s. It was the only method feasible in the face of the multilingual student population, yet at the same time it was particularly suited to the ideology of reviving Hebrew in popular speech, rejecting as it did the use of foreign languages even as a means towards achieving that aim. There can be little doubt that there were at work also motives connected with the longing to hark back to the first source, to the time when the nation lived in its

³ For a full list of terminology publications, see the Academy's brochure *Munaḥim Ivriyyim le-miqtzo'otehem*, Jerusalem, 1970. The Academy has also issued an English booklet, *The Academy of the Hebrew Language*, which can be obtained directly from the Academy, P.O.B. 3449, Jerusalem.

⁴ The so-called Natural Method, also called Direct Method, in which only the language to be learnt is used in the classroom.

own land, quite apart from Yellin's considerable powers of persuasion, when the teachers accepted in those years as exclusive basis for Hebrew teaching in schools Biblical Hebrew grammar and the Biblical Hebrew spelling, with very restricted use of vowel-letters in unpointed writing. This decision went counter to reality. The "full" spelling (with added *waws* and *yods* to mark short *i*, *u*, and *o*) had been current in Hebrew for some two thousand years, and its use was growing in Palestine until finally it became the norm in newspapers and books. Likewise, words and grammatical forms from Mishnaic Hebrew were at the time increasingly penetrating into common use.

World War I imposed upon the Jewish population of Palestine severe curtailment of its cultural activities, but also brought the Balfour Declaration, and in its wake the Mandate of 1921, in which Hebrew was recognized as one of the three official languages of Palestine (the other two being English and Arabic). As early as 1919, the first daily newspaper, *Ḥadshot ha-Aretz* (subsequently *Ha-Aretz*), was founded. In 1918, while the distant sound of gunfire could still be heard, the foundation stone was laid for the Hebrew University at Jerusalem, and in 1925 it opened its gates to students. In 1924 teaching began at the Haifa Technion. In 1925 the first regular theatre, Ohel, was established, and in 1928 the Habimah theatre moved from Moscow to Palestine. With the arrival in Palestine of H. N. Bialik (1924), of S. Tchernichovsky (1931), Jacob Cahan (1934), and other outstanding writers of the time, and the rise to fame of others, whose literary début was in Palestine, such as S. J. Agnon, A. Shlonsky, Shin Shalom, and many others, Palestine became the centre of Hebrew culture for the whole world. In contrast with the pre-War period, the focus of the development of the language was no longer in the schools, but in literature, science, art, and above all in the scintillating public life and in the self-government of the Yishuv, which formed a state within a state, all of it in Hebrew. The difficulties that the Mandatory administration heaped up in the way of the fulfilment of Zionism not only strengthened the Yishuv's political purpose, but also its attachment to its language: the Yishuv was compelled to main-

tain its own educational system, but as a result could also shape it after its own spirit; the immigration restrictions and the ensuing need for a long Hachshara (agricultural training) period abroad ensured that the pioneers came to Palestine speaking Hebrew.

This was a period when Hebrew spread both inside and outside Palestine. Jews in the new states of Eastern Europe made full use of the national minority rights accorded them by the League of Nations, and founded an impressive network of Hebrew schools (mainly of the "Tarbut" organization), in which tens of thousands of children were brought up with Hebrew both as language of instruction and as cultural content. In many countries there sprang up Hebrew-speaking societies, as well as periodicals in Hebrew. This was the beginning of the penetration of living Hebrew into the Diaspora, a process much intensified after World War II, with the foundation of the State of Israel, and again after the Six Day War.

Hebrew culture in Eastern and Central Europe perished in the Holocaust. However, the virtual siege conditions of the Yishuv and the isolation through World War II caused the domination of Hebrew in Palestine to become more profound. The establishment of the State of Israel bestowed upon Hebrew, as a matter of course, the status of official language (while safeguarding the rights of Arabic as a minority language), and thereby also a position in international affairs. However, the changed status of Hebrew, even more than in its becoming the language of a sovereign state, expressed itself in the literary manifestations concomitant with the War of Independence. A whole generation of Palestinian-born youngsters began their literary career by describing their feelings during this campaign in a language largely liberated from any influence of the sources (Bible and Rabbinic literature) and reflecting in an artistic form, and at times in a rather naive and unsophisticated way, the speech of the younger generation, with all its slang and roughness. Not only these short stories, also the hit-songs which expressed the spirit of the time, freely employed slang and common speech forms.

In this way there was exhibited for all to see a result of the revival of the language which certainly had not been asked for by those responsible for the revival: when Hebrew became the language of communication for youth, for the uneducated, for all classes of people in every activity of life, it perforce passed out of the care of style-conscious writers and cautious grammarians, and there began to work within it all those forces which unceasingly alter the structure of living languages. Whether these changes in Hebrew were caused by ignorance on the part of its speakers, or by the influence of the foreign languages they had spoken previously, or by the influence of English, which served as administrative language and as vehicle of study and outside communication, or whether they were caused—as was claimed by young linguists following western scientific attitudes—by forces generated within the language itself (and the probability is that all these factors had their share in what happened), be it as it may, the spoken language moved ever further away from the language of literature and school, and developed its own, quite consistent, grammar and idiom. Nothing was achieved by the efforts of teachers to uproot from children's speech such expressions as *an lo rotze*, "I don't want to" (for *eneni rotze*), *yesh li ta* (= *et ha*) *sefer*, "I've got the book" (for: *yesh li ha-sefer*, or: *ha-sefer etzli*), *ni yoshen*, "I sleep" (for: *ani yashen*), *otkhem* (for: *etkhem*), or *hakhi yafe*, "the most beautiful"⁵ (for: *ha-yafe beyoter*). The admonitory articles and "language columns" of the newspapers were of no avail—quite the contrary: we only learn from them that many of these mistakes were heard on the streets of Palestine as early as the 1920s.

In the 'fifties the first attempts were made to give a scientific description of spoken Hebrew. The first description appeared

⁵ The form *hakhi yafe* is not of popular origin. It was introduced by writers and philologists on the basis of II Samuel 23, 19, and was rejected only when the interpretation of the verse was considered erroneous.

in the U.S.A.⁶ Factually and methodically more accomplished descriptions were published by two teachers of the Hebrew University, Haim Blanc⁷ and Haim Rosén.⁸ In particular the publication of Rosén's book gave rise to excitement and to a violent public discussion, but the consequence of the controversy was that research into living Hebrew—both spoken and written—became a part of the teaching of the language in the universities. Linguists throughout the world started taking an interest in the evolution of Hebrew, in which they saw a kind of laboratory experiment on general linguistic phenomena, and it may well be that it was that controversy which finally put an end to the attitude of disbelief and contempt with which linguists, and particularly Semitist scholars, regarded this attempt to revive a dead language "artificially."

As it happened, the faithful guardians of Hebrew had little time in those days to ponder over linguistic niceties. With the birth of the state, a mighty wave of immigration began, which in less than four years (till 1952) added 700,000 people to the 650,000 previous members of the Yishuv. Hardly any of the newcomers knew Hebrew. Newspapers began to appear in a plethora of foreign languages; on the radio, programmes were broadcast in various immigrant languages. Faced with such a situation, the established Yishuv went into action. Hundreds of people volunteered to go out to the new villages and to the Ma'abarot, the temporary transit hutments set up for immigrants, and to teach immigrant families in their own homes. A network of Ulpanim (full-time adult language institutes) was created, as well as Working Ulpanim (where immigrants worked half a day and studied Hebrew the other half) and evening ulpaniyot. In order to assure the efficiency of the teaching, a list of the thousand words most important for the language learner was drawn up

⁶ R. W. Weiman, *Native and Foreign Elements in a Language: a Study in General Linguistics applied to Modern Hebrew*, Philadelphia, 1950.

⁷ Twenty-four feuilletons in the weekly *Massa'* from 1952 to 1954.

⁸ *Ha-Ivrit shelanu*, Tel Aviv, 1955. Both scholars subsequently published other books and articles on the subject.

with the assistance of a large number of teachers. This basic list not only served as a foundation for teaching (mainly through *Elef Milim*, the beginners' book by A. Rosen and Y. Ben-Shefer, with various revised and abbreviated editions by A. Rosen), but also for several series of books for immigrants.⁹ Two special newspapers were founded for those learning Hebrew: *Omer* in ordinary Hebrew, but with full vocalization, and *Lamathil* in "Easy Hebrew," i.e. with a restricted vocabulary.

The effort to incorporate the immigrants into the family of Hebrew speakers was crowned with success. This was a severe test for the vitality of the newly revived Hebrew culture, but it was also assisted by certain social factors: Hebrew was the only language in use in Israeli society which provided immigrants of different origins with a means of communication. No other immigrant tongue had any chance of becoming a link-language between the different groups. Since the coming of statehood, personal contacts between members of different immigrant communities in Israel have become much more frequent and permanent than they were in Mandatory times. To this practical amalgamation of the diaspora communities, one of the chief contributions was, and still is, that of the Israel Defence Army, which brings the young people together in its units, and thus also furthers the most effective amalgamation process of all: inter-community marriages. However, the army also engaged in more direct and planned activities in this direction by teaching the young immigrants Hebrew whenever necessary.

In the midst of the campaign designed to transmit the Hebrew language to the immigrants, the Yishuv realized to its dismay that in the years 1954–1958 there were amongst the Jewish population of Palestine 15% who could not read or write in any language. Not merely women from backward communities were illiterate (over 55%), but also men. These facts did not fit in with the self-image of the Jews as "People of the Book." The

⁹ A full list in *Bulletin* No. 1 of the Council on the Teaching of Hebrew, Jerusalem, 1968.

campaign for transmitting the Hebrew language turned in part into an action to eradicate illiteracy. Again the army rose to the occasion. It set up an organization for teaching reading and writing and for basic education, and sent out girl soldiers as teachers to illiterate adults. The paper *Lamathil* added a "Page for the New Reader" for those who were learning Hebrew at the same time as the elements of reading. This activity directed attention to the fact that Hebrew, as it is written and as it is taught in schools, is a rich and involved language, for the full command of which a study of literature and the ancient sources is necessary, and which is not fully intelligible to one who knows only spoken Hebrew. This is nowadays a common problem in languages the world over, which has grown out of literacy education for extensive sections of the population that formerly had no contact with literary culture. In Hebrew this problem is particularly acute, on account of its recent development out of the language of the ancient sources and the firm linkage of Hebrew literary style with those sources and the language traditions, but also because Hebrew has been serving only for a relatively short time as medium of written communication for all classes. No simple popular style has as yet emerged in Hebrew. Matter written expressly for popular consumption in our days—such as the translations of crime thrillers or cheap novelettes—is often couched in a language which is both incorrect and yet difficult for the reader. The sporting papers are an exception; they have evolved a simple and juicy style close to spoken Hebrew and using slang extensively. The concern about the gap between matter written in acceptable Hebrew and the ability of a considerable part of the population fully to understand such reading matter, has found its expression since the end of the 'sixties mainly in discussions about the education of underprivileged children. Some special textbooks have been written for such children, and attempts have been made to produce informative literature and fiction for underprivileged people.

Amongst the problems involved in bringing Hebrew closer to the people, that of reading unvocalized Hebrew looms large. Actually, this problem is twofold. One aspect is that un-

vocalized spelling does not provide sufficient guidance for the correct pronunciation of words. It thus is not only ineffective in correcting wrong forms current in common speech, but even encourages the emergence of additional mistakes. The other aspect is connected with the fact that the majority of words spelled without vowels can be read (correctly) in more than one way. Only rarely, indeed, does this indeterminacy make it possible to understand a sentence in different ways. Ordinarily the context precludes alternative interpretations of the spelling, and the experienced reader fluent in the literary language has no difficulty. Poetry, where the possibilities of misreading are greater, is anyway normally printed with the vowels. But what we have said is true only of the experienced reader, and not of one who has little practice in reading unvocalized texts, or who reads rarely if at all, or whose command of Hebrew is imperfect. Such a reader is likely to miss the hints to correct reading found in the context, especially in cases where these hints come after the doubtful word. The experienced reader is able to correct automatically a previous wrong identification, but the inexperienced reader is easily confused.

Before the War of Independence, in 1948, the Language Council worked out a proposal for a fuller spelling, with regular marking of *o* and *u*, of cases of the sound *s* for *sh* ש and of the values *b*, *k*, *p* of the letters ב, כ, פ. Because of the events of that time, the proposal was not officially confirmed. In 1953 the Hebrew Language Academy was established, which took over the tasks (and most of the members) of the Language Council, except that henceforth it was an official body, the decisions of which acquired legal force after being countersigned by the Minister of Education and Culture. After a short interval, the Academy took up the spelling problem. It appointed several successive commissions, who worked out more consistent proposals than that of the Language Council—amongst them one to mark the vowels *a* and *e* regularly by new signs placed between the letters above the line. None of these proposals obtained the necessary majority of votes in the Academy's deliberations. Finally, in 1968, the members of the Academy agreed

to reconfirm the Language Council's spelling of 1948. About a year later, on May 27, 1969, this decision was published by the Minister of Education and Culture in the official Gazette. From September 1973 onwards, the new spelling will be taught in the Israeli schools.

So far, by the middle of 1973, this spelling has not yet penetrated into general use, and the process will in all likelihood be a lengthy one. Yet the act which was performed has a profound significance: it is the first time that the State of Israel, through its central institutions, has regulated an essential aspect of the Hebrew language. We may well see in this a symbolic act marking the living connection between the people of Israel and its language.

However, this connection applies at present only to the part of the people that lives within the State of Israel. Amongst the people residing in the diaspora, there continues the state of affairs created by the assimilation and the major migrations of the 19th and early 20th centuries: traditional Hebrew, which until then had united Jews of all countries, is languishing, and has not been replaced by modern Hebrew, whether as spoken language or as vehicle for reading. Religion, culture, political thinking—all that concerns Jewry as a whole—go on through the medium of multiple translation. The problem is not merely that Jewish life is not conducted in the language in which its spiritual values were produced, and that a barrier has arisen between the cultural heritage and those in dire need of it—it lies in the fact that every contact between the larger Jewish groups in the diaspora necessitates translation. If English has nowadays become a sort of link-language in conferences and periodicals, this fact only highlights our peculiar status as a "Nation by Translation," for it corresponds to the use of English at international gatherings, i.e. to contacts between different peoples. It is notable that the beginning of the 'seventies shows signs of a turn of the tide, of a tendency to equal a knowledge of living Hebrew with personal identification with the movement of Jewish awakening. This in turn finds its expression in the marked increase of the proportion of Hebrew speakers amongst the youth, not only in the U.S.A. and

Canada, but also in South America and in Western Europe, in the growing interest of academic youth in Hebrew studies, and in the pressure Jewish students exert for the establishment of Hebrew Studies departments in the universities. It takes its most dramatic form in the awakening of the "Silent Jewry" in Soviet Russia, among Jews who set up private Ulpanim for learning Hebrew at grave personal risk, who learn Hebrew in secret, and who write Hebrew poems in prison. The essential difference is that this time the pressure comes from below, from those who do not know Hebrew. It seems that at this very moment the scattered Jewish nation is in the process of reorganizing itself around the twin poles of unity: its liberated homeland and its resuscitated language.