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ABSTRACT

The role of the Hebrew language as a cohesive force and the history of modern Hebrew instruction are chronicled. It is proposed that despite the scattering of its speakers and periods of use only as a literary or business language, Hebrew has been a binding force for the Jewish people. It was with considerable struggle that Hebrew gained recognition in the early years of this century, preceding establishment of the Jewish state. In the first years of the state of Israel, the influx of settlers from many parts of the world, speaking many languages, made necessary more systematic Hebrew language instruction. The first "ulpan," Hebrew class for adults, was founded in 1949. The ulpan centers offered food and lodging facilities, which encouraged their use and supported acculturation. Immigrant children often learned Hebrew for the first time at school, and passed it on to their non-Hebrew-speaking parents. The army was also instrumental in promoting Hebrew learning and use. (MSE)

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Hebrew as a Binding Force

Ben-Zion Fischler

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According to the Jewish sages one of the reasons why (the children of) Israel were redeemed from Egypt was that "they did not change their language." Indeed, despite distance of time and place, the Hebrew language - the tongue of the prophets - remained the language that linked Jewry the world over throughout the ages.

There were times when Hebrew served more as a written means of communication and transaction than as a means of daily intercourse. But even then, although it did not serve the day-to-day needs of the people, it fulfilled its task as an adhesive force by the prominent place it held in religious worship, prayer, festivals and study of the sources of Judaism.

Despite being scattered as a result of religious persecution and wars, or due to hardship, lack of livelihood or work opportunities, Jews persistently carried within them the nucleus of the rebirth of Hebrew, the modern language of today.

There were many, among them scholars of repute, who considered and even described Hebrew as a dead language, with no potential of revival. Even Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism and seer of the Jewish state, noted in his diary that "in the future Jewish state one would have to think about the language of the people . . . for who among us has sufficient knowledge of Hebrew to buy a train ticket in it?"

Nevertheless, in the 19th century, Hebrew was taught in many western Jewish communities as a literary language. It was actually spoken in Jerusalem - to a lesser extent in the rest of Palestine -

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where Jews from different countries met and had no other common language to help them in their dealings. Neither Yiddish nor Ladino, nor Judaeo-Arabic could replace it.

It was in this atmosphere that Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, while still in Europe, wrote about the necessity of Jewish nationhood, with Hebrew as a national language. Later in Palestine, supported and encouraged by groups of revivalists, he succeeded in his endeavours, despite strong opposition from ultra-religious circles who were adamant that the holy tongue should be reserved for sacred purposes only. Gradually Hebrew became the language of the Jewish population in Palestine. Kindergartens, schools and teachers' seminaries were established where all subjects were taught in Hebrew.

It was not, however, without a bitter struggle that Hebrew gained recognition in the years preceding the Jewish state. The German *Hilfsverein* as well as the Alliance Française established schools in which they considered it imperative to teach certain subjects in German or French. To their surprise, this met with a wave of opposition on the part of the Yishuv – the pre-state Jewish community of Palestine. For instance, in 1913, when the *Hilfsverein* planned a technical high-school (the present Technion) in Haifa, they considered it advisable to teach technical subjects in German. The reaction of the Yishuv was unexpectedly violent. Thousands of children and teachers left the schoolrooms to hold their lessons in the open air as a gesture of defiance.

In the end, the Yishuv won this language struggle, the first of many for the full recognition of Hebrew. The results of Ben-Yehuda's efforts are clearly shown by a census undertaken in 1916–18, which showed that within the Jewish population of Palestine outside of Jerusalem, some 40 percent (34,000) were Hebrew speakers. Among children, the percentage was 54 and in Tel Aviv and the kibbutzim, villages and moshavim, the percentage was as high as 77.

By the end of the First World War there were some 57,000 Jews in Palestine. By the end of 1922 the number had risen to 84,000, in 1931 to 175,000, in 1942 to 484,000 and in 1948 (on the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel) to 640,000.

In 1947, only 22,000 newcomers arrived in Eretz Israel, but during 1948–1951 nearly 700,000 immigrants settled in Israel, i.e. in the three and a half years after the state was founded, the number of Jews doubled. These newcomers came from more than 70 differ-

ent countries. They did not speak Hebrew and came from different cultural backgrounds and social strata.

The immensity of this absorption process can be appreciated upon reading a recent statement issued by the Australian authorities which declared that an immigration of 2.5 percent per year was beyond the capabilities of Australia – rich, vast Australia, living at peace and without surrounding enemy countries – to absorb.

It was imperative that these newcomers master Hebrew – the only means by which to understand and become involved in the cultural, social, economic and political life of Israel. However, apart from the urgent need to assist these immigrants in their endeavours to become Israeli citizens, it was also necessary to allow them to understand in their mother tongue what was happening on the national, political and economic scene. Thus newspapers appeared in a variety of languages to meet this need. While this constituted a certain stability, the possibility that the infusion of the main ingredient of the melting pot – the Hebrew language – might be delayed, it added a new dimension of cultural and ethnic flavour to the country.

Hebrew courses were organized long before the establishment of the state. A report of the Culture Department of the *Va'ad Leumi* (National Committee) in 1937 detailed the following information:

Region	No. of Study Centres	No. of Classes	No. of Hours per Week	No. of Teachers	No. of Students
Jerusalem	22	46	113	24	518
Tel Aviv	44	160	464	60	2527
Judea	31	62	177	30	790
Sharon	22	55	134	22	656
Samaria	7	16	40	10	213
Haifa City	18	50	118	19	605
Haifa District	3	11	18	4	111
Total	147	400	1064	169	5420

The real boost came with the great immigration waves in the latter part of 1948, with the declaration of Israel's independence. The newcomers were accommodated in tents and barracks, some left over

from the British army during the Mandate. Thus, for instance, at any given time, up to 30,000 newcomers could be found at the Pardess Hanna immigrant camp, encompassing four subcamps, which absorbed newcomers from Poland and Morocco, Romania and Tunisia, Yemen and Britain, and other places, with no common language to help them understand each other.

Many an argument started due to lack of communication. Shrill voices, strange facial expressions and unfamiliar gestures were misunderstood and erroneously interpreted as curses or insults. Sociolinguists, psycholinguists and students of Semitics, would have found a wealth of material there for their scholarly research. For instance, how does one give an answer in the affirmative? How do you say "yes" or show agreement without uttering sounds that have no meaning to those that do not understand your language? In the USA, Great Britain and most European countries, you nod your head up and down (vertically). Not so in Greece or Bulgaria, for example, where the affirmative is signified by shaking the head from right to left (horizontally). One can imagine the comic and sometimes frustrating consequences such differences can bring about.

The authorities immediately set about seeking a speedy remedy to the situation. Children were enrolled in special schools where at least some of the teachers understood their mother tongues. Although many of the teachers were unqualified, unprepared and untrained, it was their missionary zeal and dedication that made them good teachers and helped them attain excellent results. At the same time, the adults were offered intensive day and evening courses. Some classes were crowded, with up to 45 students per class.

The breakthrough came with the founding of the first *ulpan* (Hebrew classes for adults) in 1949, as a result of intensive deliberations by senior officials of the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Education.* The problem was how to free new immigrants with academic backgrounds and professional qualifications (such as doctors, lawyers and engineers) from the burden of making a living during the period of their intensive Hebrew studies. Thus the *ulpanim* began providing food and lodgings, combined with intensive courses at different levels, free of charge.

Classes were held daily, with special tutoring in the afternoons and

* See "Teaching Hebrew to Adults" by Ben-Zion Fischler (ARIEL no. 69, 1987)

lectures in easy Hebrew in the evenings. A year later the ulpan facilities were extended to all new immigrants. Thus the ulpan became a meeting-place for the student from Peru and the railway official from Iraq, the accountant from Hungary and the engineer from Algiers, the piano teacher from the Argentine and the doctor from Great Britain. Day by day, they studied and did their homework together. They exchanged past experiences from their home countries and found much in common, disregarding that which separated and accentuating that which united them.

In schools, many of the children were determined to erase all traces of the language of their countries of origin and adopt the Israeli way of life as soon as possible. To them the *sabra* (Israeli-born) represented the strength, pride and dare-devil mentality of Israeli youth. Some children even went so far as to feel ashamed of using their mother tongue which was still spoken by their parents, thus forcing the parents to address them in Hebrew. Gradually Hebrew became the binding language to bridge the gap. Ephraim Kishon, the world-famous Israeli humorist, himself a product of an ulpan, once remarked that Israel was the only country where parents learned their mother tongue from their children.

The Israel Defence Force also played a decisive part in the dissemination of Hebrew. Sadly enough, some young new immigrants who came to Israel between 1947 and 1949 from refugee camps in Europe and the British detention camps in Cyprus and were drafted straight into the army then fighting for survival in the War of Independence, were killed or wounded in battle because of their lack of understanding of Hebrew commands. This led to the army's enforcement of the teaching of Hebrew to all newly-recruited immigrants. Some 200 teachers, mostly women soldiers, were detailed to teach Hebrew full-time to groups of up to 3,500 recruits in various camps. The courses were concentrated over two- to three-week periods and classes were also held for field units where entire battalions were freed from active manoeuvres and able to devote six hours daily to the study of the language.

Thus it was that the school, the army, the ulpan and the place of employment, as well as the psychological factor - the desire to break away from the past - added to the sociological need to identify with veteran Israelis and the ambition to attain status in the community - all combined to make Hebrew the bond that united Israeli-born with

(below) Malla Carl: "Fire and Water..."

newcomers from all parts of the world.

A people is a unit by virtue of its common culture, history and destiny, and the key to a people's heritage and creativity is its national language. National and cultural rebirth in the State of Israel has been dominated by the Hebrew language which played, and continues to play, a vital role in binding together the multitude of Jewish communities who have chosen to make their home in Israel. It is inconceivable that a united nation could have become an effective unit without the cementing force of the Hebrew language which holds the spiritual, cultural and national treasures of our people.



הרי אריאל אריאל קרנת אשך זיוו

Ho, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped (Isaiah 29,1)

אריאל ariel

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