

# The “dead” language that came to life

A lively new language, sprung from Hebrew's ancient roots, gives unity to Israel's polyglot population

BY HAL LEHRMAN

**T**HERE WAS TENSION with Moscow that day in 1956, and trouble with Syrians and Jordanians on two of Israel's embattled borders. But nobody was surprised when Israel's Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett dropped everything for two hours to teach a class in Hebrew.

Nobody was surprised because the drive to unify Israel's people through Hebrew, replacing the 50 languages immigrants have brought from all parts of the globe, is desperately important to the little Jewish state. Even shaggy-haired Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion often takes time off from affairs of state to pen a scholarly article on correct use of an obscure Hebrew conjunction or to fire a heated “letter to the editor” about some disputed point of grammar.

This passionate emphasis on Hebrew has paid off. And the story of Israel's success in reviving her almost-forgotten ancient language is as remarkable as anything in her dramatic struggle for independence and survival.

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Consider these milestones:

In 1880, when the revival first began in Turkish-ruled Palestine (the land from which Israel was to be born), not a single Jewish family there or anywhere else in the world used Hebrew as a means of daily expression.

In 1917, when the British occupied Palestine during World War I, around 40 percent (34,000 persons) of the growing Jewish colony spoke Hebrew.

In 1948, at the moment of Israel's independence, 54 percent (351,000) of the 650,000 Jews already settled there spoke Hebrew.

By 1960, only 12 years later, Israel's population had soared beyond 2,000,000, of whom an estimated 1,800,000 (90 percent) were speaking Hebrew well enough to get by in their daily lives.

Another fascinating aspect of Hebrew's revival is that for nearly 2,000 years this antique language slumbered in the deep-freeze of history. Although one of the world's oldest tongues, Hebrew as spoken in Israel today is really among the world's most recent "inventions."

The Old Testament in Hebrew has a vocabulary of less than 8,000 words. But modern spoken Hebrew has over 48,000 words, most of them coined in the last 25 years.

Three living dialects—German-based Yiddish, Spanish-based Ladino and a form of Arabic—were rivals for the historic role of becoming the *single* language of Jewish Palestine. But classical Hebrew won out because the other contenders were regional dialects, while it was universal. It had been the language of the Bible, which *all* Jews revered, and of ancient Israel, from which *all* Jews descended.

In the days of Jesus (who spoke Aramaic), Hebrew was already fading from the lips of men. Today, no less than 11 Hebrew dailies and a whole shelf of magazines are published in Israel. More than 1,000 books come out in Hebrew each year. The great Hebrew University



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in Jerusalem, and four other Israeli colleges and universities teach exclusively in Hebrew. Three theatrical companies, an opera society and numerous traveling troupes play rich Hebrew repertoires.

**HEBREW'S TRIUMPH**, however, was only achieved after a long and bitter struggle, which began in 1879. In that year Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, an obscure 22-year-old, Lithuanian-born medical student in Paris, wrote a prophetic newspaper article. It proclaimed that a new faith known as Zionism would restore the Jewish people in a Palestinian homeland,

**Stamp honors Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who coined new words, won fight to make Hebrew the national tongue.**



and that Hebrew would be its language. Others scoffed at the idea of a Hebrew reawakening. Viennese-born Theodor Herzl, founder of Zionism, was quite certain that the language would be German!

Young Ben-Yehuda moved to Palestine in 1880 and began seeking converts. His first was Deborah, his own young wife, a native of Russia. She was wholly innocent of Hebrew, but the determined Eliezer



told her: "Let me teach you one Hebrew word after another. As you learn, you will drop the equivalent Russian words from our conversation and use the Hebrew instead. So, by the time our first child is born, you will be able to raise him entirely in our 'national' language."

This is exactly what happened. A Ben-Yehuda baby, Itamar, born in 1882, became the first child in modern history raised with Hebrew as his mother-tongue.

As the boy grew up, scandalized neighbors reported to their rabbis that Mrs. Ben-Yehuda was profaning the holy language of scripture by calling out the window to her little son at play such admonitions as "Itamar, darling, blow your nose!"—in Hebrew.

The outraged rabbinate moved against such "atheism," first by pronouncing the impious father theologically dead, then by denouncing him to the Turkish authorities as a "dangerous rebel."

Gradually, Ben-Yehuda's campaign attracted support. More and more Zionists adopted his credo that a national language was vital to national survival. "*Rak Ivrit!*"—"Hebrew Only!"—became a Palestinian battle cry. Hecklers began hooting at public orators unwilling to speak Hebrew. Noses were punched in street fights over the merits of Hebrew vs. Yiddish.

The struggle finally was resolved in the classroom. In 1892 teachers who had once derided Ben-Yehuda's "fanaticism" met in an all-Palestine congress and voted for Hebrew as the exclusive language of instruction in elementary schools, ousting English, French and German.

In 1906, a new Hebrew *Gymnasium* in Jaffa gave Hebrew control of a high school for the first time. Seven years later, when the directors of a new technical high school in Haifa ruled that mechanics, surveying and other specialized subjects would have to be taught in German, children and teachers in schools around the country went on strike. They



marched defiantly from their classes and stayed out until the Haifa school fell in line. Thereafter, Hebrew spread through the whole Palestinian school system.

The victory in the schools was decisive. A child absorbing Hebrew at kindergarten age came to speak it effortlessly. An anecdote illustrates the point:

Strolling with a friend in Tel Aviv one day, the poet Chaim Bialik stopped to pat a small boy on the head, then suddenly tweaked his ear. The boy ducked out of his reach, crying angrily: "*Hamor zaken!*"—"You old donkey!"

"Now that's what we need—instinctive Hebrew!" chuckled Bialik.

The real test, however, came with the establishment of the State. In the 1930s successive waves of immigration from Nazi-persecuted countries had increased the importance of Hebrew as a linguistic common denominator which every newcomer had to learn in order to get along. But this immigration was relatively small compared with the deluge pouring in after 1948. In Israel's first four years the new influx had doubled the original 1948 population of 650,000, an increase without precedent in world history! And this massive invasion came mainly from backward regions such as the Atlas Mountains, Anatolia, Kurdistan and Bombay, where people spoke dozens of languages and were totally unfamiliar with life in a Western-style democracy.

If Israel were not to be splintered by a clash of conflicting cultures, a cement to bind all these peoples together had to be found. Hebrew was that cement, and all of Israel was transformed into a classroom.

**T**ODAY there are ten full-time Hebrew institutes for immigrant professionals, dozens of part-time language courses in Israel's cooperative *kibbutz* farms, and at least 150 morning or evening schools for immigrant workers in towns and villages.

Every immigrant doctor, engineer



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or other professional who could start contributing swiftly to Israel's progress, if only he knew some Hebrew, is "kidnaped" from pier or airport on arrival and rushed to an *ulpan* ("training center"), where he is crammed with Hebrew for five uninterrupted months. Modeled after a special language-training system developed by the U.S. Army, the *ulpan* permits nothing but Hebrew to be spoken within its walls. The meaning of words is acted out in pantomime.

But the biggest target in "Operation Hebrew" is the mass of Oriental immigrants who are illiterate even in their own native languages. For these, the Government has pooled some 5,000 volunteer teachers and a fleet of trucks and jeeps that carries the instructors to the immigrant villages. And every immigrant rookie in Israel's defense forces takes a compulsory Hebrew course as part of basic training.

Radio programs, newspaper columns and phrase books also are used effectively to spread the understanding of the national tongue among newly arrived citizens.

Every established settler in Israel does his bit for the newcomer. The butcher and merchant take time off to teach a customer the Hebrew word for an item or two. The social pressure is insidious. "Aren't you doing something about your Hebrew?" the neighbor blandly asks a newly installed American or Australian family on the second exchange of visits. Nobody escapes it.

One of Israel's distinguished *ulpan* graduates, Ephraim Kishon, now the country's most popular Hebrew newspaper humorist, was sure he'd never be able to earn his living in Hebrew when he arrived some years back from Budapest. "I'm supposed to write things that make people laugh," he worried. "But in Hebrew people can only cry."

What he meant was that Hebrew to him—as to millions of Jews outside Israel—was primarily a written, religious language, to be read in



worship, prayer and lamentation.

The first modern pioneers of Hebrew speech couldn't find existing words to express such commonplace things as pencil, shoelace, postage stamp or engine. Applying Hebrew to ordinary living was like building a house from the roof down. All that was available was the Bible, the Talmud and a vast collection—mainly medieval—of dusty volumes of science, philosophy, poetry and religion.

Certain Hebrew writers in the early 19th century tried to adapt the mummified language at least to modern literary needs. But their efforts were windy and bombastic. They called gloves “houses for the hands.” The word for “microscope,” concocted from two Biblical phrases, was “a glass by which the moss that springs out of the wall shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.” One writer, straining to translate “telegraph,” fell back on *Psalms* 19, 4: “Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

Real progress wasn't made until the time of Ben-Yehuda. He and his colleagues actually began inventing words. They dug into 3,000 years of Hebrew writing, borrowed from Aramaic, an ancient tongue about as close to Hebrew as Latin is to English, and they even adapted Arabic. Before Ben-Yehuda's death in 1922 he finished the first five volumes of the new 16-volume Hebrew dictionary, finally completed in 1958. Ben-Yehuda also helped establish a Hebrew Language Committee, which selected and published lists of approved new words for use in modern living.

The Ben-Yehuda generation gave Hebrew its first elbowroom by devising elementary vocabularies for the *things* of the visible world. The next generation made up the *idea* words—the terminology of thought, art and inner experience.

In this the Hebrew University was a prime contributor. The only vocabulary for philosophy, for in-



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stance, consisted of terms from medieval Jewish writings. Hebrew was also absurdly skimpy for the natural sciences. The same was true for world literature, economics, medicine and a hundred other areas of up-to-date knowledge. By "exercising" the language on lecture platforms and in professors' writings, the University put intellectual muscle and tendons on Hebrew's ancient bones.

The third generation of word-makers arrived with the State, which created for Hebrew a world of new subjects: the Army and all the intricate nomenclature of armament and tactics; the Foreign Service and international treaties; the Supreme and lower courts; the Budget; all the complicated bureaus of a sovereign modern community.

Lately Ben-Yehuda's old Language Committee has been promoted to "Language Academy" and entrusted by Parliament with final authority over Hebrew words and grammar. Although most current Hebrew words are close to the 3,000-year-old Biblical language at least in their root, this doesn't mean that Elijah or Joshua could pick his way comfortably through a page of modern Hebrew. Some widely used words spring directly from other modern languages without benefit of scripture at all: "cotton" was trimmed into *kutana* and "gasoline" poured into contemporary Hebrew as just plain *gas*.

The most prolific word-maker in Israel today is the lyric poet Abraham Shlonsky. "Any new word," Shlonsky explains, "should rise out of something which the reader already knows. The trick is to use the consonants of a familiar word."

For example, take the ancient Hebraic origins of the ultra-modern word for "air-raid alarm." In the Bible, a "bugle" was *shofar* and a "bird" was *tsipor*; in the Talmud, *tsafor* meant "whistle"; put them together and you have *tsofar* for "siren."

Then there is slang, usually in-



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spired from abroad. When the Israeli motorist picks up a hitchhiker, he is giving him a *trempe* (an extension of "tramp"). A *traffik* is a traffic cop. Anybody courteous or considerate is a *gentelman*; a lady possessing such merits is entitled to the feminine ending: *gentelmanit*. Job is *job* in popular Hebrew, and the fellow who always knows how to find and keep an easy one is obviously a *jobnik*.

The Academy's Hebrew is not impeccably spoken in every nook of Israel. But, whatever the variety of accent or grammar, Israelis all speak the *same* language. Hebrew is making the polyglot peoples of Israel into a single nation.

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