

## To appreciate riches of Jewish cultural life, Hebrew is necessary

### THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

The late Simon Rawidowicz, a scholar who played a leading role in Jewish studies at Brandeis University, was once approached by a new colleague in the faculty dining room at Brandeis.

"Professor Rawidowicz," began musicologist Harold Shaper, "I hope you will forgive me for not being able to address you in Hebrew."

"No," was Rawidowicz's simple reply, and the conversation proceeded from there. The two supposedly-became good friends, despite the continuing "language barrier" between them.

The new year 5750 has been proclaimed the year of the Hebrew language. It is a good time to reflect on one of the great and nearly miraculous transformations of Jewish life in our era, the rebirth of the Hebrew language. The emergence of modern Hebrew is one of the important Jewish success stories of our recent history, one often lost sight of amid the many tumultuous events of our times.

Two centuries ago, Hebrew existed as it had for seemingly countless generations: the literary vehicle of the Jewish elite, largely rabbis. It was the proper language for biblical commentary, legal decisions and the workings of rabbinic courts, theological discourse and synagogue poetry.

Correspondence between learned Jews was conducted in Hebrew, and rabbis' sermons, though preached in the vernacular, were translated into the sacred tongue for publication. When a wider audience was sought for popular religious tracts, they were printed in Yiddish or Ladino. Hebrew was used orally only for broken bits of communication between Jews from different lands, as described in some very funny scenes by Sholom Aleichem, the Yiddish author and humorist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Still, it is not quite fair to say that Hebrew was a "dead" language. Jews loved and revered Hebrew, however imperfectly they might have used it. We believed it was the "original" language, the one through which God had created heaven and earth. It was the language in which we poured out our hearts in prayer, the one in which we heard our ancestors speaking and the one in which we dreamed Elijah would soon call out to us to announce Messiah's arrival.

This ancient legacy of Hebrew as the holy tongue gave birth in the era of nationalism to a devoted core of Hebrew literati, men and women who gave their lives for the rebirth of Hebrew as a living language.

Best known among these is Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, whose tireless efforts led the battle to make Hebrew the exclusive language of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael. But there were countless others — writers, poets, translators and, above all, teachers — who played a crucial role in this "miracle" during the course of a hundred years or more.

Many of these people suffered from poverty and a lack of recognition that could have been theirs had they turned their efforts elsewhere. But the accomplishment they wrought may be a more lasting one for the Jewish people than anything else they might have chosen. Some of them must have known this, and the growing success of their efforts, both in Israel and elsewhere, must have spurred them on when the going was tough.

Hebraism reached these distant shores at the beginning of this century, along with the great immigration. Especially after World War I, institutions such as Gratz College, the Boston Hebrew College, the Teachers' Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and others were great

centers of Hebrew creativity.

The summer camps where Hebrew was spoken made a great contribution to the growth of Hebrew knowledge here. It began to seem that at least some American Jews might be able to overcome the general difficulty that Americans have in achieving bilingualism and that there might be a thriving, if small-scale, Hebrew culture here.

Now, even that bit of achievement in this country is threatened. The older generation of Hebraists did not replace itself, and young people who share their love of the language are few and far between. Instructors in afternoon schools have all but given up on Hebrew, and the lack of professionals for the field of Hebrew education has reached crisis proportions.

The passing of higher-level Hebrew instruction from Jewish institutions into the general university has made for greater professionalism, to be sure, but the change may turn out to have its costs, as well.

Why do we care that American Jews know Hebrew? Why fight the battle if it will cost so much and be so difficult to win? There are essentially two reasons, one having to do with the past and the other with the future. Jewish culture simply doesn't work in translation. The richness of allusion, the fact that we have had 3,000 or 4,000 years to learn how to say things that evoke response, the power of symbols, the subtleties of expression, just don't carry over in translation.

Despite all the wonderful efforts being made these days to translate the Jewish classics, I wish their readers would put the books down and spend the time learning Hebrew instead. The Jewish folk imagination that created Yiddish understood this, by the way, and it is often the 15-or-so percent of Hebrew vocabulary within Yiddish that gives it its special Jewish flavor. We Americans do not live in isolation and will not create an American Yiddish in any full sense.

But we will always be culturally impoverished Jews if we do not know Hebrew.

A new Jewish culture is emerging in our time, created in Hebrew in the State of Israel. We Diaspora Jews are marginal to that creativity, seeing only the small portion of it that appears in translation. Insofar as we speak and read only English, Israeli Jewish culture and North American Jewish culture will develop as separate entities, not feeding into one another, and leading to further division of the Jewish people. A cadre of American Jews who know Hebrew, who write in Hebrew, who review and participate in Hebrew cultural life could serve as a bridge that would bring our two communities closer together.

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I write to encourage those who still work to maintain some part of this vision. It is the day schools that stand today as the best hope for Hebrew education in America, along with carefully planned and educationally sound, longer trips to Israel for adolescents and adults. Rabbinical schools and other institutions of higher learning are part of the effort, as well. More power to all those who labor *bekorem hatvrit* (in the vineyard of Hebrew).

Was the professor rude in refusing to pardon his colleague for not knowing Hebrew? No, he was just a firm believer. The point he was making is one we should take to heart. It is Jewish history that will not forgive us for having failed to create an American Jewry that knows its language. If we are to have a creative and strongly Jewish cultural future in this country, we will only do so thanks to those who give of themselves to teach and study Hebrew.

A great miracle has taken place in our day. Ours is the only language in world history to survive nearly 2,000 years of dormancy to come to life again. How long will we American Jews stand on the sidelines of that miracle? ■