

The Resurrection of a Language and the Language of Resurrection

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Lewis Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew*.
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IN THE EPILOGUE TO THIS INFORMATIVE, well-written overview of the history of the Hebrew language and its relation to Jewish culture, Lewis Glinert observes that “an Israeli teenager today can open a three-thousand-year-old chapter of biblical prose and understand it almost unaided... By contrast, no English speaker today could open a one-thousand-year-old ‘English’ text and make sense of it unaided; it’s another tongue.” The accuracy of this arresting observation raises before us the most curious phenomenon of the resurrection of the Hebrew language. By around 200 CE, Hebrew had ceased to be spoken as the language of the daily life of the Jews, yet it was brought back to life two thousand years later as the language of the people of the land of Israel. This book is an account of the resurrection—if that is an appropriate term to express this revival—of Hebrew, not only as a script but as the language spoken by, and thereby conveying the culture of, a people.

However provocative is Glinert’s contrast between the ability of the Israeli teenager to understand the ancient Hebrew of the Bible and the inability of the English-speaking teenager to comprehend the English of Shakespeare, let alone Chaucer, it is not entirely accurate. In the Hebrew Bible, there are approximately thirteen hundred words that appear only once within it. The appearance of a word only once in a text is characterized by scholars by the technical term *hapax legomenon*. Not all of the *hapax legomena* in the Hebrew Bible are difficult to understand, but about four hundred are. The latter will not be understood by an Israeli today, and they are usually designated by the editors of one’s English Bible by the note “Hebrew uncertain.” What to make of the existence of these four hundred words?

The uncertainty of the modern, Hebrew speaker as to how to understand these biblical words indicates that no resurrection is complete. Something gets lost; but that this is so should be no surprise. The language of a people is not fixed as if it were a material object that, once misplaced or lost, may simply be recovered. A language draws upon the experiences of individuals and groups of individuals for its existence. To the extent that this takes place when a language is understood, we say that the language is “alive.” Life, however, is a process of the ebb and flow of adaptation, of both stability and change, where new words appear and new accomplishments are achieved, but where other words fall out of use and previous accomplishments, even though they leave residues of influence, are forgotten. Thus, there are two forms of life. One is obvious: the life of individuals. The second are the accomplishments of individuals that take some kind of objective form, for example, as a language or a book. These cultural objects, although forms of life, differ from the life of individuals; for the former are kept “alive” by their continual “animation,” that is,

through their continual use by, or involvement in the lives of, the latter. They are, as are all forms of traditions, dependent upon being nourished in the present through being recognized or received from the past, if they are to be understood. But in any act of reception of the past into the present, some aspect of the past may be either obscured or ignored as a result of the changing interests and demands of the present, only to be partially recovered at another time, or, as with those four hundred words, lost perhaps forever.

The only way to recover the meaning of these otherwise obscure, biblical words, as William Schniedewind observes in *A Social History of Hebrew: Its Origins Through the Rabbinic Period* (Yale, 2013), is for scholars today to decipher their meanings through comparison with their apparent cognates from other ancient Semitic languages, in particular Ugaritic, which disappeared as a language around 1200 BCE, and Akkadian, which had been replaced by Aramaic by the sixth century BCE. However, the lost meanings of biblical Hebrew words are not confined to these four hundred *hapax legomena*. For a well-known example, the traditional translation into English, and often designated as a “traditional translation” in the notes of one’s bible, of *’el šaddāi* in Genesis 17:1 is “God almighty” (based upon the Vulgate’s *Deus omnipotens*; the Septuagint leaves *šaddāi* untranslated), “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty.’” But the Hebrew *šaddāi* likely has nothing to do with the word “almighty,” for it is surely a cognate of the Akkadian *šadu*, “mountain,” and the related Akkadian word *šaddû’a*, “mountain-dweller.” Thus, the accurate translation of *’el šaddāi* is not “God almighty” but “God of the mountain” or “God, the mountain-dweller.” By the second century BCE, when the Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Hebrew sacred writings appeared, the

meaning of the Hebrew *šaddāi* had evidently become lost. And since Akkadian had become a dead language, the Akkadian cognates could not be exploited to elucidate the meaning of *šaddāi*. Thus, not only today’s Israeli does not understand biblical words like *šaddāi*, but neither did the Judeans of the fourth through first centuries BCE, when later biblical books such as Daniel, Esther, and Ecclesiastes were written, understand them.

What those *hapax legomena* whose meanings are uncertain and other words that have traditional but not accurate translations like *šaddāi* (or, for example, *asherah* which is translated as “sacred pole” in the Septuagint and Vulgate, that is, some kind of wooden cult-object, but which the Ugaritic mythology clearly indicates to have also been the name of God’s wife in that mythology) indicate is that the Hebrew of the Hebrew Bible is not uniform; rather, as Schniedewind and other scholars have convincingly argued, the language of the Hebrew Bible reveals a periodization into earlier “Standard Biblical Hebrew” and “Late Biblical Hebrew.” Given these linguistic changes within even the Bible, above all the lost meanings of not only those four hundred *hapax legomena* but also other words like *šaddāi* and *asherah*, all the more remarkable was the bringing back to life of this otherwise dead language.

But was the Hebrew language dead? Not entirely. One wonders if the resurrection of Hebrew would have been possible if a true, that is, complete, death, indicating a decisive break in continuity, had occurred. Some languages and some traditions become, and have remained, dead; but other languages or traditions remain alive. Why and how does one remain alive, or is capable of being brought back to life, while another dies and remains dead? It seems that for the revitalization of any tradition to be possible, there has to have been maintained some

kind of connection, however faint and unavoidably changing, to individuals. Much of Glinert's book is devoted to examining the different ways that the connections to Hebrew were maintained during the last two millennia, even though it had, until the twentieth century, not been a language of daily use by the Jewish people.

During and subsequent to the sixth century BCE, Aramaic became the spoken language of the Judeans, thus, of Jesus and the Apostles. Thus, it is to be expected that, as Aramaic had become the language of the Jews, much of the discussion of Jewish law in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds (fourth to sixth centuries CE) is in Aramaic. Indicative of Aramaic having become the spoken language of the Jews, the rite of passage of the Jewish male into adulthood is known as the *bar mitzvah*, "son of the commandment," where the Aramaic *bar* is used for "son" and not the Hebrew *ben*. Surely important, if not decisive, in maintaining a connection to what might have otherwise become the dead language of Hebrew among the Aramaic-speaking Jews was the rabbis' choice of Hebrew as the language of the daily prayers of the Jews and collection of laws by Judah ha-Nasi (c. 200 CE) known as the Mishnah, the origin of which was believed to have been with Moses at Mt. Sinai. Eventually a liturgy in Hebrew developed, even though not all of the Hebrew may have been understood.

That choice conveyed an understanding that Hebrew was not merely a language but was understood to be a "holy tongue." It was, according to the extra-biblical book of Jubilees (c. 150 BCE) and the rabbinic commentary on Genesis, *Genesis Rabba* (c. 300-500 CE), the language of God, of creation; for, as stated in the Mishnah, the Hebrew alphabet was created on the sixth day of creation. Thus, the language of the Jewish house of study, the synagogue, conveyed, or perhaps was, as liturgy, homologous to creation itself.

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An expected expression of this linguistic consciousness of Hebrew as a holy language was the exclusion of any Aramaic or Greek words in the Dead Sea Scrolls, as they were composed by the messianic Jews, likely Essenes, at Qumran. Perhaps a more striking example of this elevation of the Hebrew language is its appearance, written not in the square Aramaic script as it was then and continues to be today but in the obsolescent, pre-exilic script of Paleo-Hebrew, on the coins minted by the Maccabees and during the Jewish rebellions against Rome from 66-73 CE and 132-135 CE. The revival of the earlier script and the inscriptions "For the Freedom of Jerusalem/Israel" in Hebrew on those coins reveals a reaffirmation of the legitimacy of the tradition of national autonomy, of the nexus of language/people/land, asserting a continuity of the Israel of David and Solomon (c. 1000-920 BCE) with an Israel one thousand years later.

What is remarkable about the resurrection of Hebrew is that the connections to the language were maintained in the absence of that nexus, that is, despite the near total exile of the Jews from their land after the two rebellions against Rome. The continued use of Hebrew, albeit largely confined to prayer and study, in these circumstances contrasts it with the revival of regional languages, for example, Welsh, where a nexus was maintained. Likely these connections to Hebrew were historically made easier because a pattern for their continued existence had already been established during the earlier Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE. However, in contrast to the aftermath of

the first exile, the nexus of language/people/land was shattered by the second century CE; yet, the connections, however attenuated, to Hebrew survived. That survival was not through the appearance of a later Ezra or Nehemiah, who had brought from Babylon to the by then Aramaic speakers of Judea the “scroll of the teaching [torah] of God” (or “the scroll of the teaching of Moses,” Nehemiah 8:8, 8:1) in Hebrew, albeit in the square Aramaic script, but through what Glinert aptly describes as the “guardians of Hebrew’s textual memory”: the Jewish scholars, the Masoretes, who preserved the biblical text by creating an authoritative biblical spelling with vowels, hence pronunciation, and signs for chanting. These connections to Hebrew were reinforced through the appearance of prayer books, the use of which, with liturgy and prayers in Hebrew, had spread throughout the Diaspora.

New challenges to sustaining connections to the Hebrew language arose with the conquest of the Arab armies throughout the Mediterranean world, as Aramaic was displaced by Arabic. Saadiah Gaon (882-942 CE) produced a translation of the Torah into Arabic (or Judeo-Arabic, that is, Arabic written in Hebrew script). However, despite this adoption of Arabic, Saadiah also wrote *The Book of the Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews* which included the first systematic Hebrew grammar, thereby contributing to keeping Hebrew alive. Similarly, while Maimonides (1138-1204 CE) wrote his philosophical *Guide for the Perplexed* in Arabic, his reorganization of the Talmud, Jewish law, and custom, the *Mishneh Torah*, appeared in Hebrew. Other writings in Hebrew appeared, both in Spain, most notably the poetry of Judah Halevi (1075-1141 CE), and in the Muslim heartland.

The use of Hebrew continued in unexpected ways. For example, as Glinert notes, at Salerno, the first medical school in

Italy, instruction was not only in Arabic, Greek, and Latin, but also in Hebrew, as, over a span of several centuries, much of the Greco-Arabic science had been translated into Hebrew. For example, a Hebrew version of Avicenna’s medical magnum opus, *The Canon*, appeared in 1279. And then there was Rashi’s (1040-1105 CE) great commentary on the Bible, written in Hebrew but with numerous glosses, some of which were in medieval French, to explain terms and phrases, the meanings of which had become obscure. However, forced conversion of Jews to Islam in Spain, as early as 1148, forced Jews to flee to those parts of Christian Europe where they were still tolerated (the Jews having been expelled from England in 1290 and from France, first in 1182 and again in 1306 and 1394). There, a serious competitor to Hebrew developed: Yiddish, a Judeo-German language written in Hebrew script.

During the early modern period of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, a revival of interest in the Hebrew language arose from an unexpected quarter: Christians, to which Glinert devotes two chapters. Alongside the renewed interest in the history and culture of Greece and Rome that we associate with the reception of Roman law, the Renaissance, and Erasmus’ Greek edition of the New Testament, many European Christians looked past Greece and Rome to ancient Israel and the Old Testament. They did so to understand not only the heritage of the West but also for guidance about how to organize themselves as a society in the world as a national “new Israel.” Universities throughout Europe now taught Hebrew, with professorships devoted to its study. A good examination of this Christian turn to the Old Testament is Frank Manuel’s *The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Harvard, 1992). The outstanding scholar of the paradoxical Old Testament Christianity of this Christian Hebraism was the Englishman John Selden

(1584-1654 CE), about whom three excellent works have recently appeared: Jason Rosenblatt's *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden* (Oxford, 2006), G.J. Toomer's *John Selden: A Life in Scholarship* (Oxford, 2009), and Ofir Haivry's *John Selden and the Western Political Tradition* (Cambridge, 2017). Thus, while in 1553 Pope Julius III ordered copies of the Talmud to be burned, Selden, Johannes Reuchlin, Johannes Buxtorf, Hugo Grotius and others defended studying the Mishnah and Talmud, both for its own sake in pursuit of truth and as necessary to understand better the New Testament and early Christianity.

In addition to the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe speaking Yiddish, the incorporation of Jews as citizens into European societies resulted in another challenge to the connections to Hebrew: the vernacular languages of those societies. Still, Jewish boys and occasionally girls in Eastern Europe continued to learn Hebrew, beginning at an early age in a day school, the *heder*, and, as the boys grew older, at a *yeshiva*. By the end of the nineteenth century, enterprising intellectuals established newspapers written in Hebrew, the circulation of which was, of course, insignificant in comparison to the Yiddish newspapers. Nonetheless, they existed; and that they did is appropriately characterized by Glinert as a "minor miracle." Thus, there arose a complicated linguistic complex of the use of three languages—Yiddish, the national vernacular, and Hebrew. This was the context in which appeared those individuals dedicated to reviving a Jewish culture that they thought must include Hebrew: the cultural Zionist and editor of a Hebrew monthly, Aḥad Ha'am, the poets Judah Leib Gordon and Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik, and, above all for the purpose of the resurrection of Hebrew as the daily language of the future Israelis, Eliezer Ben-Yehudah (1858-1922 CE).

Today, we suffer from the loss of many of the works of Yiddish literature, for example, Chaim Grade's magnificent novel, *The Yeshiva*. It is a pity that even translations of these works into English and Hebrew are not readily available. But at the turn of the twentieth century, it was an open question about what should be the language of the Zionist movement. Some understandably thought it would be Yiddish; Theodor Herzl assumed it would be German; and it was not until the eighth Zionist Congress in 1907 that Hebrew was proclaimed as the language of Zionism. Even then, very pious Jews restricted use of Hebrew to the synagogue, as it was the "holy tongue." Other developments on the ground, so to say, would prove decisive. In 1889, the first Hebrew elementary school was founded in the land of Israel; and, as Glinert notes, by 1898 twenty elementary schools there taught their subjects in Hebrew. New words in Hebrew obviously had to be created, if the resurrection of Hebrew as a modern language were to succeed. Ben-Yehuda met this challenge with the appearance, beginning in 1909, of *The Ben-Yehudah Thesaurus*. Other developments followed, as in 1913 when the Technion, the engineering/technology university, was being founded, the so-called "war of languages" erupted over what should be its language of instruction, German or Hebrew; eventually it would be Hebrew. Concomitant with these developments, literary classics in other languages were translated into modern Hebrew, for example, the works of Dante, Goethe, and Poe by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. After a period of almost two thousand years, the nexus of language/people/land had been re-established.

One aspect of the resurrection of Hebrew merits further attention. How would the small state of Israel, facing one existential threat after another since its founding in 1948, secure the revival of the Hebrew language? While the groundwork had been

laid for re-establishing the sociolinguistic nexus of Hebrew as a national language, the task of securing the connections of that nexus was enormous, if not seemingly impossible. In 1948, there were approximately 650,000 Jews in Israel, not all of whom spoke Hebrew as their daily language. In addition, during just the first decade of the state of Israel's existence, more than one million Jews, many of whom knew little or no Hebrew, were penniless, and recently released from internment camps in Europe or fleeing persecution from throughout the Middle East, immigrated to Israel. Two institutions were decisive in meeting the challenge of consolidating Hebrew as the language of the national state of Israel: first, the *ulpan*, a national network of schools for learning Hebrew; and second, the Israel Defense Forces.

While the state institutions of the *ulpan* and the IDF were important in that consolidation, for our understanding of the reception of tradition in general, it should be remembered that for two millennia the connections to Hebrew that kept it "alive" in the daily life of the Jews were not products of the initiatives of any state. Those initiatives could and did come from different sources, ranging from the prayers of the rabbis in

antiquity, to the prayer books of late antiquity, to the poetry of Halevi, to Ben-Yehudah's historical dictionary of Hebrew, and to the proclamations of the eighth Zionist Congress. Furthermore, those sources were not only diverse but also could be in tension with one another, for example, the ultra-orthodox Haredim's continuing use of Yiddish as a daily language with Hebrew as the language of God's words. Finally, while the writing of a language represents the conserving of the spoken language by both stabilizing it at one period of time and, as a scroll or book, transmitting what has been written down over time, this textual, linguistic conservatism is nonetheless confronted with the ever-changing spoken language which, in turn, sooner or later influences the written language, as was seen even within the Hebrew Bible. It turns out that the miracle of a never complete resurrection is dependent upon the survival of any number of mundane connections. But one wonders, why do some traditions avoid death? Surely, the vagaries of history is one reason why some traditions, however unavoidably changed, survive, while others die. However, one suspects that there may be more to be said about cultural resurrection. A