

THE RESURGENCE OF HEBREW¹

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I.

A STUDENT casting about for some one simple indication of the extent of the resurgence of Hebrew, should consult the survey, by an industrious statistician, of the Jewish Press in the world today.² Turning to the section on the State of Israel he will find listed in the Hebrew language 12 daily newspapers; 3 evening newspapers; 36 weeklies; 10 fortnightlies; 82 monthlies; 26 quarterlies; and 61 periodicals appearing at irregular intervals—in all about 230 items.

The *dailies* require no comment, and for a population of a million and a half with varied and decided political enthusiasms a dozen daily papers is not excessive. But the three *evening* papers, each of which has a large sale, require comment. With the full news service provided by the Israeli Government broadcasting station, morning papers might be suspected to be ordered as a matter of habit, or as a badge of political affiliation, or as an anticipatory compliment to the wisdom of the editorial chair; but *evening* papers are surely bought only to be read. So far as the *weeklies* are concerned, among their 36 there are many children's newspapers (some of them issued in conjunction with the big dailies, some independently), and special publications for fashions, sport, cinema, business, educational methods and institutions, settlement-bulletins and records, and reports of judicial decisions. The subjects of the 82 *monthlies* range over various sectors and systems of agriculture, municipal government, building, diatetics, aviation, medicine, gardening, poultry farming, nature study, kindergartens, bibliography, art, textiles, statistics, Jewish-Arab relations, labour exchanges, Hebrew language, police (by the name of 999!), general literature, theatre, and taxes. The 26 *quarterlies*, mostly coming from the University and other learned societies or institutions, are devoted to scholarly enquiry and scientific research; among them are included journals for the veterinary services and stamp collecting. The '*irregulars*' cover accounting, psychology, medieval history, the local branch of the Society for the United Nations, and the occasional publications of the University Medical School.

It is obvious that of all this periodical proliferation much is ephemeral, much highly specialized, much technical and professional, much crank.

But even so, presumably there are people who read it (if only the printers), even somebody (if only the publisher) who bears the cost. We may suppose that societies and organizations, with or without government or party support, account for much of it—the viticulturalists, the bio-chemists, the poultry farmers, the co-operatives, the cinema owners, the business groups, the philologists, the archaeologists, even the philosophers. It is certainly true that many of the independent *literary* journals at least (as in most countries) have a hard struggle to survive. But all this does not affect the vital point: the language is palpitatingly alive; and it is used over the whole range of modern interest from Art and Aviation to Zoology and Zymotics. This seeming miracle requires accounting for.

II

Some conventional explanations must be corrected first.

As the eponymous hero of modern Hebrew, recent tradition has fixed on the figure of Eliezer ben Yehudah, the author of a vast dictionary of the Hebrew of all the ages, only recently completed from the notes he left at his death. The legend is that one morning he announced to his wife that he had decided to speak only Hebrew; and it was this piece of vivid obstinacy, to which he adhered for the rest of his life, which (we are told) proved the beginning of a general linguistic snowball.

The story is pleasing but it should be taken symbolically only, with the meaning that whereas *before* Ben Yehudah some Jews *could* speak Hebrew, *after* Ben Yehudah they *did*. For the truth is that Hebrew has a long and continuous history behind it; and a glance at the shelves of any standard library would show books written in Hebrew throughout all the many centuries (say, three millennia) of Jewish recorded history. Apart from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Lachish Letters are in Hebrew; the Elephantine papyri are in Hebrew. The Book of Ecclesiasticus was written in Hebrew; the newly found Dead Sea scrolls are in Hebrew; the sayings of the Rabbis are in Hebrew; tradition speaks of a Gospel in Hebrew; the Jewish Prayer Book is in Hebrew; the medieval hymn-writers, the moralists, the chroniclers, wrote in Hebrew; while at least till the time of the French Revolution both public and private correspondence was conducted in Hebrew, diaries were kept in Hebrew, wills were written, journals composed, in Hebrew.

It is thus clear that Hebrew was not a new discovery of Ben Yehudah and his generation. Nor was it confined to the world of professional scholarship. The plainest of plain men was linked to Hebrew. The prayers he learned at his father's knee and heard in Synagogue; the words he used for the recurrent religious occasions—feasts and fasts; birth, marriage, and death; the weekly Sabbaths and the yearly high holy days; the technical vocabulary of his community organization—

all with few, very few, exceptions, were in the authentic Hebrew either of the Bible itself or of the Biblical idiom.

The plain man would not necessarily be a Hebrew scholar, though it is surprising how many of them were; but Hebrew would not be strange to him. Up to the time of the French Revolution universally, and after the French Revolution for the most part, there was no divorce between the Hebrew language and the Jewish communities. And up to a certain degree Hebrew was also *spoken*. When Paul the Apostle said that he was a 'Hebrew of the Hebrews', the latest student (Professor Dodd in his recent study of the Mind of Paul) affirms that his meaning was that he spoke Hebrew and came from a Hebrew-speaking family. Rabbi Judah the Prince, the compiler of the Mishnah, pronounced himself to the effect that in Palestine one should speak not the vulgar Aramaic but Hebrew (or Greek). The medieval Jew, travelling (or driven) over Europe and the East before the prevalence of the German-Hebrew dialect of Yiddish or the Spanish-Hebrew dialect of Ladino, used the lingua franca of Hebrew. A visitor to the Amsterdam school in which Spinoza had once learned reported in 1680 that in the higher forms Hebrew only was spoken. The hints are various but wide-spread. The Hebrew spoken may have been like Church Latin, stilted, scholastic, strained, but it was still Hebrew; and it provided a common medium of intercourse when any other was lacking. When Sir Moses Montefiore visited the Jewries of the East a century or so ago, he took with him a special Hebrew secretary.

What then did Ben Yehudah and his circle do? They did for Hebrew exactly what Socrates is said to have done for philosophy. They brought it down from heaven to earth. They took it from the learned men and the sacred occasion and gave it to the ordinary man for the ordinary occasion. They made it the language of the plumber!

The real point of fact, and of interest, in their work was just that: a learned and a sacred language, used only on occasion for everyday purposes, was turned into the *current* language of every day. It is for this reason and in the light of this fact that the three evening papers of Tel Aviv are to the student of cultural history so significant. Here is no metaphysical treatise, or record of Rabbinical decisions, or handbook of moral maxims, or synagogue hymn, or grace after meals, or traditional greeting, or compliment on great occasions; but, in that very same language, and recognizably in that very same language; the very latest of the very latest news of the day, 'hot' from the hands of its fabricators.

III

Modern Hebrew is thus not the creation of Palestine or the State of Israel. (If anything, the State of Israel is, on the contrary, the creation of modern Hebrew.) And its birth *date* is as difficult to determine as its birth *place*. Ben Yehudah only took over what he found; and what he found was a succession of authors of varying gifts and quality who had abandoned learned or sacred topics and begun to use their Hebrew to describe, either factually or imaginatively, their own and their community's present state and condition and feelings and perplexities and satisfactions. Who was the first it is difficult to say. Steinschneider, the great bibliographer, describes somewhere a manuscript, containing a Hebrew version of the story of King Arthur and the Round Table, made by an unknown author of the thirteenth century during attacks of insomnia. Is this a stirring of modernism? The historians of modern Hebrew Literature do not help us. Some take their point of departure from Moses Hayyim Luzzato in seventeenth-century Italy; some, Moses Mendelssohn and his circle in eighteenth-century Germany; some, nineteenth-century Russia with its satirists and novelists and composers of historical romances; some, the later luminaries who were alive and active in our own day: the essayist Ahad HaAm, the poets Bialik and Tchernichovsky. But this very variety of opinion suggests that what constitutes modernity, not only in Hebrew but in general literature, and indeed in the world at large, is a matter of opinion. That things are not now as they once were, is obvious; and it may be, as Professor C. S. Lewis suggested in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, we should put the break between the ancients and the moderns not at the so-called Renaissance or Reformation (both of them a deliberate returning to things *past*), but at the invention of the spinning-jenny and the Industrial Revolution, say (for literature), somewhere between Jane Austen and Dickens. So I shall take my courage in my hands and fix my own arbitrary date and say that the beginnings of modern as opposed to classical Hebrew are to be seen, not in the scholars and not in the mystics and not in the novelists and not in the poets and not in the satirists and not even in the dictionary makers, but in one determinate political fact. This fact was the official recognition of Hebrew in the Mandate for Palestine granted to Great Britain in 1922; and it is symbolized not by Eliezer ben Yehudah hectoring his unfortunate wife but by the no less obstinate figure of the late Menahem Mendel Ussichkin, stolid, bull-like, the very opposite of reasonable and all that reasonableness implies, standing up before the members of the Peace Conference at Versailles and addressing, or rather haranguing, them in Hebrew.

IV

We should remind ourselves of some almost contemporary facts.

The last year of the First World War, the year 1918, saw the establishment, through the victories of General Allenby over the Turks, of British control in Palestine; and this control, vested in the legal instrument of the Mandate for Palestine, lasted till the surrender of the Mandate in 1948. Article 22 of the Mandate reads as follows:

English, Arabic and Hebrew shall be the official languages of Palestine. Any statement or inscription in Arabic on stamps or money in Palestine shall be repeated in Hebrew, and any statement or inscription in Hebrew shall be repeated in Arabic.

Thus in law Palestine became a tri-lingual country, each section of the population having the right to use its own language, or rather (what is not quite the same) to have its own language used.

To the mono-cultural and mono-lingual mind of today this may seem strange, but in those days it was quite understandable. The multi-lingual federation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a familiar, although by then outgrown, fact. Two languages were spoken in Belgium. In Holland, schoolchildren were taught (as indeed they are still taught) in addition to Dutch, a choice of two out of three other modern languages (English, French, and German). The example of Switzerland showed that even official State-tri-lingualism, however awkward on occasion, was practicable.

The case of Palestine, however, presented a peculiar feature. English, the language of the Mandatory power and the gateway to the modern world, was in no sense a local language (if *any* European language was locally known, it was French); while at least one of the two other languages named together with English in the instrument of government had not been used for the requirements of a modern state. (I am referring of course to Hebrew. The difficulty with Arabic was different, but that is not our concern here at the moment. My remarks are directed to Hebrew only.) Small wonder that in some official quarters the whole conception was pooh-poohed and treated as not much more than a pleasant gesture of romantic peace-makers or a complimentary, but perfunctory, bow to history.

But the Jews thought otherwise. Hebrew had now its opportunity. It was to be used 'not as of sufferance but as of right'. And the leaders of Jewish Palestine took that right seriously. They were not to be put off with a Hebrew word on coins and stamps, a Hebrew name on railway stations, Hebrew lettering on official notepaper. They demanded the right in full, and they saw that they got it; and the right, as I have observed, was not only that *they* should use Hebrew (after all, who could prevent them? A British Mandate wasn't necessary for *that!*) but that Hebrew should be used; and used, I repeat, for public affairs, and not

as of sufferance but as of right. Thus the Mandate offered just that element of necessity (if you like, just that leverage) required to make the so-called miracle of the resurgence of Hebrew an urgent practical demand.

For whatever it may have been *thought* to mean (or even what it was *meant* to mean: the second sentence in the Article quoted might well have been intended as a *limitation*), it was *made* to mean—and made to mean not in a vague future (*bukhra; mañana!*: the tomorrow which never comes) but now, today, this very minute, at once—not only Hebrew in schools (that was, up to a point, understandable even to the official mind, though even now there are highly trained British political thinkers and University administrators who cannot conceive the possibility of any kind of education above the elementary in any other language but English), but Hebrew as a language of Government in the full sense; and that meant Hebrew in legislation, Hebrew for pleading in court, Hebrew for communication with authority with its corollary of Hebrew in all Government departments, Hebrew in all official communications and speeches (and of course the same for Arabic: how audiences used to sit and suffer as the dullest and longest of public addresses was given in English *and* Arabic *and* Hebrew!).

But there it was. The political opportunity begat the practical necessity; and modern Hebrew, that is, Hebrew adequate to all the facts and demands of a modern organized community, sprang into being.

V

We may pause for a moment and consider again what Hebrew as a *language of government* meant. It meant that the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary had to be made to function in Hebrew. Administrative activity of any kind, and at all stages, had to be conducted in Hebrew. Awkward? Difficult? Superfluous? Possibly; but there was no option! Such was the provision of the Mandate!

And so the great process of adaptation to the needs of modern government, which in practice meant *governmental translation*, began. It was clear that by the nature of the case all renderings had to be exact. There were in existence already heaps of ordinary translations: for the children, for example, there were whole series including Dickens and Fenimore Cooper, Jules Verne and Dumas. But these were rather re-writings in an easier and slightly condensed form. The letter of the law could *not* be paraphrased; nor could police notices or tax forms. And so the work had to be well and truly done, without loopholes or possibilities of evasion. And here we have the quiet but definite reminder of the present and practical value of erudition. The old words came alive and into their own. Talmudic law, as is well known, concerns itself not only with religion and ceremonial. It covers the whole gamut of civil and criminal

law; and now Hebrew or Hebraized Aramaic terms, used originally, perhaps, in the courts of Mesopotamian Jewry in the Parthian Empire of the early centuries of the Christian era, became again current coin. At times some coaxing was needed; but Rabbis and professors joined forces with practising lawyers, ancient learning with day-to-day experience of the advocate's office or the magistrate's court. And thus the improbable became possible, the possible actual. Lists of needs were circulated; questions asked; answers found.

And so the opportunity was used. It was used fully, used completely. It was used without compromise; I had almost said, without mercy. It was understood, and presented to Government, totally.

VI

But what happened when it could not be met? And in one crucial case it could not, in the opinion of Government, be met. This case was that of education.

The Mandatory power was convinced that it could not afford a full system even of primary education for the whole country. By its lights it was right. With its rigid financial ideas it really and truly and honestly could not afford it. It could not put up the buildings; it could not train the teachers; it had a costly obsession about the magical value of English and the necessity of following exclusively English precedent. But Palestinian Jewry wanted, and intended to have, a full system not only of primary but of secondary, and not only of secondary but of all sorts of varied types of, education—it probably didn't itself know exactly what: technical, musical, agricultural, and of course university. A constant bone of contention was the kindergarten. The Mandatory power, unaccustomed to the idea of public kindergartens—are there any in Great Britain yet?—and having no money even for primary schools, scoffed at the idea. Palestinian Jewry, polyglot and multilingual, saw its chance for future unity in the Hebraising of its children from their earliest years.

And so Palestinian Jewry parted company with the Mandatory and set up its own educational system. This was under the formal inspection of the Mandatory which gave it a block grant; but in despite of (almost to the despair of) the Mandatory, it comprised everything from teachers' training colleges to kindergartens. The expense was borne in part by internal taxation but mostly by external contributions. It would be false to say that everything in it was good. Much of the Mandatory Education Office's criticism was sound. But it is no use telling an avalanche that it is not behaving by approved standards. Willy nilly, by hook or by crook (and it must be conceded that there was quite a lot of the latter too) Hebrew was to be taught as of right to every boy and girl in the country who wanted it; and they all did.

And here it is necessary to explain something which is so obvious that it is often overlooked. It was not only that Hebrew itself was taught. Every subject was taught *in* Hebrew. Hebrew was made the general medium of teaching. Not only history and geography and literature but mathematics was taught in Hebrew. Botany was taught in Hebrew. Chemistry was taught in Hebrew. That is to say, mathematics, chemistry, and botany were themselves *taught Hebrew*.

It could not have been otherwise. The children not only worked in Hebrew. They played in Hebrew. They quarrelled in Hebrew, they swore in Hebrew. Quite a new crop of linguistic developments appeared. I offer one which has nothing to do with the teaching of the sciences or the playing of games or even with Lars Porsena but which is nonetheless of considerable linguistic interest. 'Ishmael' is an obvious name for a wild boy; and in Genesis xvi. 12 Ishmael is called *Pêrê Adam*, a phrase which the English versions translate prosily 'a wild-ass among men'. So your 'devil may care' boy became in popular parlance, long before the Palestinian school system came into being, a *Pêrê Adam*. But the Palestinian school system, when it came into being, was (except in the case of certain special schools) co-educational. What was a teacher to call a 'devil may care' *girl*? Obviously, some inglorious Milton must have thought (if indeed he *thought* it; it sounds rather, as Socrates used to say, a 'divine inspiration'): *Parah Adumah*—in form almost a perfect feminine of *Pêrê Adam*, only it happens to be the 'red heifer' of Numbers xix.!

VII

This is native growth, and it suggests the dispelling of another conventional illusion with regard to modern Hebrew. It is that of the Semitic philologist who when he hears of modern Hebrew lifts up his hands to Heaven and bemoans the degradation of classical Hebrew at the hands of barbarians. It would be a sufficient retort that it is literally the Latin of the Barbarians which emerged as the music of modern Italian. But in our case the facts are different. Modern Hebrew has as its invariable concomitant—I had almost said, its irremovable shadow—the medieval and ancient, and particularly the Biblical. You cannot get rid of it even if you want to.

Now that is a remarkable thing. It means continuity in elementary usage. The words in common use now, those appertaining to the ordinary affairs of life, are the words found in the Bible. It is true that in the various periods of history there were borrowings from other languages, notably from the Greek and the Arabic; but these borrowings were supplementary, and while enriching the language did not disturb or eject the native and primary. What has been called the 'vocabulary of the home' remains Biblical to this very day. The words in current use

for such elementary things as 'foundation, wall, doorpost, column, crossbeams; window, chair; oven, loaf; spring, well; knife, cheese, milk, wine; candle, flame; ladder; flail, mill; bridle, manger; doctor; inn, prison', are all to be found in common texts of the Bible.

(This list was drawn up by Professor Henry Lewis to illustrate the 'interpenetration of the *Welsh* vocabulary' by words of Latin origin.)

VIII

In the work of restitution and development an important part was taken by the Hebrew University. It so happens that the period of British control covers exactly the founding of the University on Mount Scopus (just outside Jerusalem) in the presence of General Allenby in July 1918, its inauguration by Lord Balfour in April 1925, and the abandonment of its buildings on Mount Scopus in February 1948. The point to be noted in its regard is much the same as that made earlier with regard to Government. Just as the Mandate presented a right which, rigidly interpreted, imposed, on all concerned, a duty, the duty of carrying out *Government* functions in Hebrew, so the existence of the University as a Hebrew University presented a right which imposed a duty, the duty of carrying out *University* functions in Hebrew.

I stress the word *University*. There were learned men in Jewish Palestine long before 1918; and learned men worked there outside the framework of the University during all the period we are considering. Learned societies flourished, and flourish; learned journals were, and are, issued; learned lectures given, courses of instruction held, congresses and seminars and summer schools, all the frills and flutters of scholarship, both authentic and supposititious, were, and are still, flourishing outside the University. But these were (and are) by their nature haphazard, sporadic, dependent on fashion, on individual whim and interest, on the accident of energetic secretaries. A University, on the contrary, is by its very nature systematic and continuous. It is an organization directed to the conservation and expansion of knowledge through the constant impress of the wisdom of the past and the strivings of the present on the young and growing mind. And as its aim is quality, so its method is thoroughness. Nothing but the best is its ideal; and even if that ideal is not attained, it is at least kept in sight and is therefore endowed with power. The Hebrew University, by virtue of its being a University, gave Jewish Palestine a constant stream of young men and women who had gone through the University mill in Hebrew; and it gave it, in Hebrew, a constant stream of books embodying both original work and summary accounts of the state of present knowledge. For the tentative gropings and personal ventures of the past it thus substituted a permanent institution functioning systematically and continuously.

IX

Thus the 'miracle' of the resurgence of Hebrew, like many another miracle, is explicable in simple terms of human will, human will *plus* adequate preparation. The requirement in its stringent and unescapable form stemmed from a political fact; the fulfilment, from the putting to use of an existing tradition. Under the pressure of need the pursuit of learning came into its own.

We hear a great deal these days, particularly but not only with the awakening of Asia, about the difficulty of giving higher education in a national language. But if the experience here described has anything of general interest to teach us, it is clearly this. If you *really know* a subject and want to expound it (not *say* you want to expound it but *really* want to expound it), or if you put, or find, yourself in a position in which you *have* to expound it: if only the subject is alive in you and you are alive to the subject, any linguistic medium with the seed of life in it will both itself live and bring life.

And this is true not only of Universities and University work. It is true of all manifestations of cultural life. If you have something to say and the will to say it, you can say it in any language you choose. But you have to want to say it in that language really and truly, truly and honestly and sincerely. And you have to have something to say. Perhaps in these days that *is* a miracle.

NOTES

¹ A Public Lecture given at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in October 1955.

² Josef Fraenkel, *The Jewish Press of the World*, 3rd edition, Cultural Dept. of the World Jewish Congress, 1954.