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The Roots of Zionist Culture

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The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel Since 1882: The Construction of Hebrew Culture in Eretz-Israel, edited by Zohar Shavit. 780 pages. Jerusalem: The Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities and Bialik Institute, 1998. [Hebrew].

THE AUTHORS AND EDITORS of this monumental volume devoted fifteen years to its preparation, and the results are indeed worthy of all praise, at least regarding the wealth of material presented before the reader for the first time. The collection sums up in detail the various processes that led to the construction of the Hebrew-Zionist culture in Palestine, from the first wave of modern Jewish immigration to Palestine through the establishment of the Israeli state, and its immediate aftermath. The volume's approach is essentially sociological-institutional, focused not on the textual analysis so fashionable in "Cultural Studies" today, but rather on the histories of institutions such as educational systems, journals and newspapers, publishers, theater troupes, orchestras, [Hebrew] language council (*va'ad ha'lashon*), museums, etc. This approach can be seen as the political economy of culture and is worthy of praise, despite the fact that this focus on institutions leads to some blurring of the contents of the local Hebrew culture, as will be seen.

The collection begins with the assumption that at least some of the frameworks that could be located at the cultural core in Palestine were created in Europe, fell into "crisis" there, and were transferred to Palestine—often with an intermediate stop in Western Europe or America—through adaptation to the local conditions. Two cultural centers—one in North America and one in Palestine—competed to attract creative talents and institutions from Europe, which had collapsed as a "natural" cultural marketplace, but was still dominant and able to mobilize material resources. The competition between the three centers of Hebrew culture was decided, according to Shavit, when, "beginning from the middle of the 20s, the Eretz-Israeli [Palestinian] center grabbed the hegemony among the centers of Hebrew culture, though the literary center was still supported financially, as was all of the Yishuv society¹ by the Jews in Europe and in the United States" (p. 55).

The volume's emphasis is justifiably placed on the Hebrew language, while most of the other elements of the cultural "basket" revolve around it with Hebrew literature as the central axis. But here the authors and editors of this volume entangle themselves in one of the book's several internal contradictions. The "revival" of Hebrew was not a "written revival" (since it always existed and was "alive" as a written language), but rather the creation of a modern spoken language, capable of being used for profane daily speech as well as for writing and expression in the sciences and various professions. For generations the Hebrew language (not necessarily Biblical Hebrew) was the elitist "high" language of world Jewry, the language of creation and the language of the

¹ The Jewish-Zionist political community in Palestine

educated male producers of both the holy and the secular cultures. At its side were always two other languages—the popular Jewish spoken language (mainly Yiddish or Judeo-German and Ladino or Judeo-Spanish) and the local language.

The three languages complemented one another through an established hierarchy. The competition, one might even call it culture-war, between Yiddish and Hebrew broke out in the last two decades of the nineteenth century when these two languages began to flourish. However, Yiddish had an advantage over Hebrew in that it was also accompanied by a cultural blossoming. The competition was, from its inception, about the cultural consumer market and only later about the argument of which language would be the “national” language. Yiddish had two interrelated advantages over Hebrew: first, most of world Jewry knew it; and this is due to the second reason, which for some reason the authors of *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel Since 1882* either have forgotten or hidden—Yiddish, despite being written in Hebrew letters, was much more “user friendly.” To this day, after its complete victory in Israel as well as worldwide, and its improvement beyond recognition, even experienced and learned readers of Hebrew do not know how to read and to pronounce an unfamiliar word in a non-vocalized Hebrew text (and where do people vocalize today and just how many of those with thorough knowledge of Hebrew are even able to vocalize unless it is their profession?).

From the mid-1880s, however, there began a dramatic increase in consumption of cultural items written in Hebrew. The first and second volumes of the periodical “HaMa’asef” (1894-95) won more than ten-thousand subscribers. The first Hebrew bestseller, “Love of Zion” by Abraham Mapu, sold only 1200 copies when it first appeared in 1857, but between 1870 and 1989 it earned five printings of thousands of copies each. The appearance, or re-appearance, of Hebrew journals and newspapers like “Shiloach,” “HaZman,” “HaYom,” and “Zfira” belong to this period of blossoming. But it is important to remember that during this same period there was a flowering of Yiddish journals and newspapers with many times the circulation of Hebrew publication, and some of the Hebrew papers also subsidized their publications with Yiddish editions or sections.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a recognizable and dramatic decline in consumers of Hebrew cultural items, and most of the publishers and publications were not financially sustainable. Shavit supposes that the relative flowering was part of modernization and the exit of the Jews from the ghetto, the religion, and the community. In the first stage the “official” elitist items in Hebrew provided a window onto the modern world for the educated Jews in Eastern Europe. However, when they learned the local tongue well enough they once again had no need for Hebrew as an intermediary, but turned to the original texts instead.

Moreover, Hebrew did not succeed in Europe in being stratified, something which Yiddish did accomplish. This meant that Yiddish succeeded in providing tools for both “high” and “low” culture, and dynamically and authentically absorbed and incorporated within it the terms and viewpoints of the secular world which the Jews who were still in the framework of the boundaries of the ethnic community needed. Writers, editors, publishers, entrepreneurs and providers of Hebrew culture found themselves without markets and with no demand for their goods. Hebrew remained elitist, and so its flagship, the

periodical "HaShiloach", declined in circulation to only about seven hundred subscribers worldwide, and closed as a result.

The collection's most interesting thesis is introduced at this point, though it is not as openly and sharply presented as it is going to be in this review. The thesis itself is not new in the professional literature on nationalism in the world, but historians who self-identify themselves as mobilized Zionists have been careful up until now not to adopt it lest the alleged moral innocence of the movement is ruined. This thesis states that when the Hebrew intellectuals, writers and publishers realized that they were losing their readership, and a critical mass of new consumers did not develop in North America, they joined the national movement in order to create an audience of consumers and an exclusive "people" for themselves. Here is the source for what Zohar and Ya'akov Shavit term "the transfer of the cultural center from Europe to Palestine." From this aspect originates the declaration of Yiddish as the "diaspora culture;" it is also the starting point for a belligerent and unyielding opposition to it, and the construction of the Hebrew cultural bubble in Palestine. Shavit phrases it as follows:

this recognition of the artificial situation of Hebrew literature in Europe, which later became a conscious and expressed recognition among literary figures and provided the impetus toward the transfer of the literary center to Eretz-Israel [Land of Israel], derived from a shrewder analysis of the existence of Hebrew culture in Europe. Not only did the Hebrew culture exist in a state of diglossia [bilingualism] and of what can be termed as 'cultural diglossia' [biculturalism], but that this cultural system was not capable of functioning as a 'normal' system since there was no need and no legitimacy for stratification of the system, a process which characterizes all 'natural' cultural systems (p. 54).

Zohar Shavit rightfully sees the arrival of writer Joseph Haim Brenner in Palestine as the beginning of the construction of an alternative "Hebrew center." "Center," according to the view of the compilers of the collection, is not necessarily a Dubnovian or Ahad Ha'amian qualitative-cultural term, but rather refers to an institutional infrastructure of a critical mass of creative figures, promoters, newspapers, publishers, and the means for printing, distributing and most of all a market of sufficient cultural consumers to provide financially for themselves. Brenner, for this purpose, was not only a valued writer and publicist himself, but also a promoter, publisher, editor and leader. A critical mass of cultural producers and consumers, however, was still not found, so Brenner often included Hebrew writers from Europe and America in his collections and desperately tried to find markets there. Brenner's murder in 1921 caused demoralization among the literary and cultural producers in Palestine accompanied by a deep financial crisis which brought the local Hebrew literature to the brink of collapse.

However, in the mid-1920s (paradoxically against the background of severe financial crisis) a certain growth began—at least in terms of the output—of literary cultural publications, examined one after the other by Shavit. First, ambitious young authors (like S. Y. Agnon, who would become a Nobel prize laureate much later, and Devorah Barron) arrived in Palestine, followed between 1924 and 1926 by more established writers and cultural promoters, among whom Chaim Nachman Bialik, the recognized national-poet, was the most important. His arrival signifies a struggle for dominance in literary and cultural

life between those who had just arrived from Europe but were already well-regarded, and the more veteran "locals," with each group searching for allies, readership and financial supporters in Europe and America. The periodical "Hedim" had already begun to appear in 1922, modest in size but diverse in content, under the editorship of Asher Barash and Yaacov Rabinovich and with the participation of Abraham Shlonsky and Yitzhak Lamdan. For seven years, beginning in 1926, it was published under the editorship of Eliezer Steinman and later Shlonsky. At first it was the journal of the Writers Association (established in 1926). Later, following a dispute with Bialik and his group, "Hedim" was the voice of the "modernist" opposition to the Hebrew literary establishment as represented by the weekly magazine "Ketuvim." In its first incarnation, it published works from Shaul Tchernikovsky, Barash, David Shimoni, Zalman Shneur and Mattityahu Shoham; in its second, the poems of Alexander Penn, Shlonsky and Nathan Alterman. In 1933, the "Yachdav" group, led by Shlonsky, left "Ketuvim" and founded "Turim," which was unique in its humanist-universalist ("non-patriotic") orientation.

In 1939, the "Yachdav" group also disbanded against the background of an argument over the degree of politicization of literature. Shavit claims that this was a turning point, that from here on cultural producers were increasingly divided on party political lines rather than between artistic schools of thought. At the same time, Lamdan succeeded in 1938 in publishing "Gilyonot," a journal that was "non-political but diverse on issues of the Yishuv," completely dedicated to prose. In it, S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilanski) published "Ephraim Returns to Alfalfa" and "Night Without Gunshots," considered as major turning points in establishing a young-nativist Hebrew prose. Orpaz, Shachar, Aharon Amir, Yehoshua Bar-Yosef, Devorah Barron, A. A. Kabak, and Shenberg-Shenhar also published in "Gilyonot."

When reading with the perspective of time about the bitter arguments and struggles between the different groups and artists, the reader cannot help but smile. The battles for personal and group standing and power, readership and sources of funding are almost a given. But the differences of opinions between the schools of thought today seem somewhat ridiculous, since there was complete agreement between all the groups on the principles of the "Hebrew hegemony." All were united in opposition to the cultural types—the "diaspora experience" (Yiddish), the "old Yishuv," the "Baron's colonies," and even the "city" (though almost all lived in cities), "the Arab village" and the "backward Levantine culture" that this represented (Y. Shavit, p. 15).

An important, if somewhat dry, survey piece is dedicated to the development of local publishing houses, first with regard to the private ones, then those of political parties, and finally public ones. Most of the Hebrew publishing houses, paralleling the literature and the writers, have their origins in Europe. Though the transfer to Palestine was accompanied by financial and other crises, the hundreds (often thousands) of titles, mostly translations but also original Hebrew works from different publishers, present an impressive picture. Thus, within twenty years it was possible to read most of the European classics in Hebrew, which created a rare meeting of cultures. The other side of the coin was that walls of Hebrew transformed the following generation in Palestine into a unilingual, uncultural, and parochial (if not even largely ignorant) generation in contrast to the multilingual, multicultural tradition of the diaspora Jew.

Already around 1903, two institutions were established that would play a decisive role in the future of the political and bureaucratic coercive imposition of the Hebrew language in Palestine: the "Eretz-Israel Hebrew Teachers Association" and the "Language Council." Their role was to unite teachers with different orientations and who taught in different schools around a unified Hebrew curriculum and to arrive at standardized terminology, accent, and linguistic innovations. Raphael Nir's chapter on the Hebrew language presents the conventional wisdom that in the colonies people taught, spoke and knew Hebrew nearly from their inception, while ignoring the critical letters not only of Benjamin Harshav, but also of Ahad Ha'am, showing that perhaps a bit of Hebrew was taught, but that until the 1920s it certainly was not the spoken language. However, Nir is correct that the opening of the two Hebrew Gymnasiums in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem between 1906 and 1910 granted a special prestige to Hebrew, despite the few students that studied there. But the language-wars broke out in full force when the German Jewish philanthropic organization—the "Ezra"—decided to found the "Technicum," a high school for science and technology in Haifa, with the "Reali Gymnasium" at its side.¹ The organization decided that the teaching language would be German, the universal scientific language of the time. The decision caused a rebellion among students and teachers in the other schools of the "Ezra network" and even rioting, which Nir sums up in an understated fashion saying that "the tension reached such levels that the Turkish police had to intervene" (p. 112). Another reaction to the decision of "Ezra" was the calling of a special session of the Zionist Congress, which decided to establish a university in Jerusalem whose sole language of instruction would be Hebrew. I look at the syllabi that my colleagues and I give to our students and burst out laughing at this, since today the "bibliography" is overwhelmingly in English, or better to say, in "Americanish."

For many years, the "Language Council" (later the "Academy of Hebrew Language") and the "Teachers Association" held a radical purist position. In the public arena, use of Hebrew was enforced even by violent means such as the Language Guardians Battalion, and by political means, which brought about the recognition in September 1923 of Hebrew as one of three official languages of colonial Palestine. The attempt was made not only to enforce Hebrew as the sole spoken language, but also to force the use of a uniform standard high Hebrew through an all-out war against slang. If it had depended only on the official language institutions, the stratification of Hebrew would have been prevented and thus would have remained in its traditional place as the language of a narrow elite. According to Nir, while the immigrants were ready to accept the linguistic dictatorship, he believes that it was the "Sabra" (local born) children who rebelled against the standard language and developed a language of their own. This is an accepted hypothesis, but it is still not supported by any significant research.

Besides the conceptual and other chapters that I have mentioned, the collection includes surveys on the founding of frameworks for theater; music (in which it is worth mentioning the oratorio as a biblical vision); the building of public libraries; an outstanding chapter by Gila Balas on the Association of Painters and Sculptors; and chapters on the popular "songs of Eretz-Israel,"

¹ A high school that emphasized teaching of scientific and technological knowledge.

children's literature, journalism, movies, dance, and graphic design. But missing are separate chapters or sections on the Bezalel arts academy and on the contribution to local culture (or lack thereof) by the Hebrew University. There is a good chapter on non-canonical literature, but we do not know a thing about the content of other "local" cultures, including the urban and village culture of the bourgeoisie, the Sephardi and Ashkenazi "old Yishuv" and especially the Arab culture, and on the relations between them and the Hebrew culture. We also do not know what people wore, what they ate in different time periods, how they traveled within the country and how they made love or cursed.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that what was done in the Yishuv period was not only the construction of a language and a culture, but also the invention of a new "Hebrew" national system of terms and its imposition upon the Jewish residents. In this way a basic ethos and myth were constructed. The authors of *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel Since 1882*, having taken an institutional-economic approach, could not (and perhaps did not want to) deal with the processes and content of this system. The founding fathers of Hebrew nationalism tried to create a secular society. Nevertheless, by choosing the term "Holy Land" as their territory and also "Holy Tongue" as their language, they created a ticking time bomb within this secular culture. Even the most completely secularized Hebrew language, whose transformation to a daily language was attributed to a secular Jew, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, could not shed its apocalyptic religious messianism. Gershom Scholem, the well-known scholar of Jewish mysticism, noted this already in 1926 in a letter to philosopher Franz Rosenzweig:

The people here [in Palestine] don't know the meaning of what they are doing. They think they have transformed Hebrew to a secular language, that they have removed the apocalyptic thorn from it. But this is not the truth...[E]very word which was not just created new, but was taken from the "old and good" vocabulary [i.e., the Bible] is full to its banks with explosives...God will not deafly surrender in a language in which he has sworn thousands of times to return to our lives.¹

¹ Aviezer Ravitzki, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 27.