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## The Revival of the Hebrew Language in Israel Was Difficult Beyond Words

Bialik pressed Palestine's Jews to speak Hebrew, but 'sinned' himself by using Yiddish, and Tel Aviv officials wanted residents to lie and say they dreamed in Hebrew. A scholar finds that the development of Hebrew as a lingua franca was beset by a complex reality



Hebrew lesson for new immigrants in Dimona, 1955. Credit: Moshe Pridan/GPO

 **Ofer Aderet**  
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Some 90 years ago, just ahead of a general census taken of residents of the Land of Israel, the Tel Aviv Municipality made an unusual request of city residents: They were asked to respond in the affirmative to the question of whether they spoke Hebrew – even if they actually dreamed in Yiddish, read in German or cooked in Ladino.

“The definitive and clear answer regarding the Hebrew language as the lingua franca of the core population of our city has abundant national and political value,” an advertisement distributed by the municipality explained to local residents, adding, “We wish to point out to the residents the important need to emphasize the place of our national language in our public and cultural lives.”

Scholar Zohar Shavit, an expert in semiotics and culture research at Tel Aviv University, found this advertisement in the Tel Aviv municipal archive while carrying out a new study, aimed at examining the status of the holy tongue in the eyes of inhabitants of the Land of Israel on the eve of Israel’s establishment.



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משרד המידע והתעמולה, תל אביב, 1954

“More than a few of descriptions of Hebrew’s presence in the public domain were colored in a propagandistic hue,” Prof. Shavit says. “At times, even seemingly objective statistical data about the extent of Hebrew’s presence in the life of the Yishuv (pre-statehood Jewish community) were biased and contaminated,” she adds, referring to the Tel Aviv municipality’s interference in the 1931 census. At the time, it seems, any means were valid “in the attempt to present a picture of the Hebrew language’s exclusiveness in the life of the Yishuv,” she adds. But in fact, the researcher discovered, “there was a tension between reality and how it was depicted.”

A poll conducted in 1912 found that less than half of the city’s residents spoke Hebrew. Out of the 790 residents of Tel Aviv at the time, 43 percent reported that they spoke Hebrew, 35 percent Yiddish (denounced as “jargon” by some), 11 percent Russian, and the remainder French, English, Ladino, Arabic and German. The Zionist thinker and author Ahad Ha’am expressed concern at the time that the data “would serve as a weapon in the hands of the haters of Hebrew,” and wondered “if in Tel Aviv a majority of the residents are also speaking other languages, and the jargon (Yiddish) rules on an equal standing with Hebrew – where, then, is the revival of Hebrew?”



Hebrew poet Haim Nahman Bialik. Credit: Avraham Suskin/GPO

At the same time, Ahad Ha'am scolded the press, which published the results of the poll, for not having presented more detailed data that would have proven, as he put it, that "nearly all of the children are speaking Hebrew."

Prof. Shavit discovered another instance where children were described as heralding the revival of the national language in an article by Itamar Ben-Avi, son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the driving force behind that revival process. In 1902 Ben-Avi described the language of kindergarteners in the city of Jaffa, abutting Tel Aviv thus: “And with a melodious ringing, using an authentic, living and pleasant Hebrew, they call everything by its name. They speak Hebrew... they play Hebrew... they quarrel and wonder in Hebrew,” he wrote.

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Still, that description did not quite reflect the complex reality. Indeed, the opposite picture was presented by the pioneering Hebrew poet Haim Nahman Bialik, in 1909. “The first impression, truth be told, is not one of a revival,” he wrote his wife Manya, after a visit to Jaffa. “To my dismay, I heard in the Jewish neighborhoods, in Neve Shalom and Neve Tzedek, jargons of Russian, Spanish and a jargon in which many Arabic words were mixed. I did not hear the melodious ringing of the Hebrew language, except in the mouths of a few children.” Similarly, Bialik’s visit to Petah Tikva, the “mother of the moshavot [colonies]” in the Yishuv, did not portend well: “It made a bad impression on me, for it was there I heard Hebrew spoken even less than in the other colonies. Even in the mouths of the children, I heard Hebrew spoken only sparsely. Almost nothing,” wrote the future national poet.



Hebrew lesson in Jerusalem. Credit: Cohen Fritz/GPO

## Rival jargons

Bialik's harsh impressions were accurate, for their time. A survey conducted exactly a century ago by the World Zionist Organization found that the number of households in which Yiddish was spoken was noticeably greater than those in which Hebrew was spoken. For example, in Jaffa's kindergartens, 232 children spoke Yiddish at home, whereas Hebrew was the lingua franca in the households of only 115 youngsters. The data for all educational frameworks in Jaffa – kindergartens, primary schools, high schools and teachers' seminaries – was not any more encouraging: Only 51 percent of students in those institutions spoke Hebrew at home – either as the sole language or along with a foreign tongue.

The situation in Jerusalem was far worse. Of the 906 kindergarten children polled, only 67 spoke Hebrew at home; the rest spoke Hebrew and an additional language, or did not speak Hebrew at all. Shavit found that in the mid-1920s, the Yishuv's educational system itself did not take pains to ensure that instruction would take place exclusively in Hebrew. Some 20 percent of

all of Jewish schoolchildren, in other words one-fifth of the young generation, was being educated during these years in different languages.



Allenby Street in Tel Aviv, 1938. Credit: Zoltan Kluger/GPO

The first Hebrew-language school in Palestine, and in the entire world, opened in 1886 in Rishon Letzion – the Haviv School, where the faculty included Eliezer Ben-Yehuda himself. Rishon Letzion was also home to the first Hebrew-language kindergarten, overseen by educator Esther Shapira. Nevertheless, David Yudilevich, a teacher who was affiliated with the Bilu agricultural-settlement movement, testified that the reality was actually multilingual and that use of Hebrew among the children in those years was still fairly limited: “The toddlers and the older children all speak an Ashkenazi or Sephardi jargon, or Russian or Romanian. They speak every language except for Hebrew. The language that is destined to be revived was at that time found to be poor and meager. Even the everyday words were still missing,” he said.



Hebrew's biggest rival was Yiddish, researcher Shavit explains, noting that "it was portrayed as a continual threat to the Hebrew project." In this context, future Nobel Prize for Literature laureate S. Y. Agnon offers an amusing anecdote: He related that even an Arab servant girl spoke with him in Yiddish when he was looking in Jaffa for the Sephardi synagogue.

"The linguistic reality was complex," notes Shavit, whose findings were published in an article entitled "What did Hebrew Children Speak?" in the periodical "Israel." Along with pride in promoting the Hebraic project, including development of the language of the people and of its culture, and the sometimes violent efforts to enforce use of Hebrew in the public domain – "many other language enclaves were preserved," she writes. Thus it took decades until Hebrew was able to reach its primary status among natives of the land.



Scholar Zohar Shavit. Credit: Adi Mazan

### **Amusing anecdotes**

Shavit, who grew up in Tel Aviv in the early 1950s, had a Polish-born mother and a Russian-born father. At home, only Hebrew was spoken – even when her father was writing his Hebrew-Russian dictionary. “That was the essence of my identity,” she says, recalling her father’s habit of correcting her girlfriends’ Hebrew. “I thought that everyone was like me, that everyone had grown up in a home in which everyone spoke, studied and worked in Hebrew. Only years later did I understand that we were the exceptions.”

Her own experiences informed her research, as part of which she collected quantitative information from archives, along with anecdotes from older generations of residents in order to document the attempt to inculcate the Yishuv with the Hebrew language; it emerges that attempt notched much success, but not quite as quickly as one would have thought.

Aside from the data, Shavit's study includes several very amusing anecdotes. "I want them to do everything in Hebrew. They should also go to the bathroom in Hebrew, holler, steal and commit adultery in Hebrew," Bialik is quoted as saying, in a book by author Simon Rawidowicz, his colleague in the World Hebrew Alliance – an organization that endeavored to disseminate the Hebrew language. Quite ironically, Bialik himself wrote – in Yiddish – about his vision of the future that hopefully awaited the Hebrew language in the Yishuv.

Shavit discovered that even Bialik at times "sinned" in Yiddish. In 1927, he clashed with a young man who had followed him along Allenby Street in Tel Aviv, after the stalker chided him for speaking Yiddish. "Here in Tel Aviv you have to speak Hebrew," the young man told him. Bialik responded: "Go! Go on your way – to hell! Chutzpah!"

These days, in early 2022, the struggle for Hebrew seems like a distant chapter in history. Still, Prof. Shavit warns us that "Hebrew is an asset that was deposited in our hands, and we have to protect it." She says she notices mistakes made by even those who purportedly speak the language well – "even on the television's [state] Channel 11," she says. Moreover, members of Knesset do not always excel when it comes to use of Hebrew, either.

"It is impossible to imagine a member of parliament in Germany or France speaking with mistakes," says the professor, apparently yearning for an era when people made an effort to show that they spoke proper Hebrew.

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