

Zohar Shavit

The Father of Modern Hebrew's Unusual Alliance With non-Zionist Jews

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Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the driving force behind the revival of the Hebrew language, had to give up his starving children and almost lost his sanity, as he and his wife fought to get his 17-volume Hebrew dictionary funded

I'm not fluent enough in French to explain how difficult my task has been and how much danger I believe the dictionary is in. If Mr. Ben Yehuda dies before he completes it, he will take to the grave all the treasures he has collected by the sweat of his brow – his labor and sacrifice over a quarter of a century. Believe me, dear Mr. Bigart, you must move quickly. As they say in Hebrew: *Yafah sha'a ahat kodem* – the sooner the better.

This is what Eliezer Ben Yehuda's wife Hemda wrote in French on June 3, 1907, to Jacques Bigart, the secretary general of the Paris-based Jewish organization Alliance Israélite Universelle. Hemda urged him to make a quick decision on whether to support her husband's dictionary project. Of course, it wasn't just any dictionary, it was the first modern Hebrew dictionary, and her husband was seriously ill.

On the same day, she also made an emotional appeal to the Alliance's president, Narcisse Leven, to join a German Jewish organization – Ezra: Der Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden – in helping bring the work to completion.

“You need to act quickly ... so that the work can be saved and become a treasure of the Jewish people, and of science,” she wrote.

Jérusalem
Benyehouda

Paris le 3. 6. 07. ²¹

N^o 8979/2
3 JUIN 7

Cher Monsieur Bigard,

Ci-enclos le déposé à propos
du dictionnaire, et je compte
sur votre appui. Je ne connais
pas assez la langue française
pour vous exprimer combien ma
tâche est difficile et dans quel
dangereux je trouve le dictionnaire.

Monsieur Ben-Yehouda meurt
avant de le finir il entrainera
au tombeau tout ce trésor qui
était ramassé avec tant de
fatigue, de peine et de sacrifice,
pendant un quart de siècle.

Croyez-moi une seule chose,
cher Monsieur Bigard, qu'il faut
se hâter, comme on dit en hébreu:

! 837 2PK 286 221

A letter Hemda Ben Yehuda wrote in French on June 3, 1907, to Jacques Bigart, the secretary general of the Paris-based Jewish organization Alliance Israélite Universelle. Credit: Alliance Archives

Zionist groups and the political and cultural leaders of the Jewish community in pre-state Israel opposed the endeavor.

This desperate appeal was only one leg of the Ben Yehudas' arduous journey as the Ben Yehudas sought to win funding for a cornerstone of the revival of Hebrew nationalism, "The Dictionary of the Hebrew Language, Old and New."

They knocked on the doors of non-Zionist benefactors and organizations. They had to: Zionist groups and the political and cultural leaders of the Jewish community in pre-state Israel opposed the endeavor. They treated it with disdain and even put obstacles in the Ben Yehudas' way.

Thus non-Zionist Jews and organizations like the Alliance and the Hilfsverein, which in pre-state Israel sought to promote French and German rather than Hebrew culture, supported the dictionary. They did so not from Zionist motives but out of a desire to help create a work that preserved the history of the Hebrew language, just as other dictionaries had done for European languages throughout the 19th century.

To a large extent, Eliezer Ben Yehuda has been enshrined in Israelis' consciousness thanks to Dvorah Omer's novel and Yaron London's song that tell how the lexicographer sacrificed his son Itamar on the altar of his Hebrew-language madness. Ben Yehuda allegedly was a "funny Jew" who made up words from his fertile mind.

Ben Yehuda did have a feverish mind, but a funny Jew he wasn't. Throughout his life, his complex and demanding personality made him many enemies.

'There are moments when terrible despair comes over me, at times even insanity, and then horrible anger consumes me,' wrote Ben Yehuda.



Russian–Jewish linguist, and the driving force behind the revival of the Hebrew language, Eliezer Ben Yehuda. Credit: GPO

Many of the stories about his journey writing and publishing the dictionary can now be gleaned thanks to letters discovered in the Alliance's archive in Paris – most of them in French, some in German or in Hebrew. They are often in draft form, and many are difficult if not impossible to decipher.

Still, the letters make it possible to reconstruct much of the story of the dictionary's creation, mainly by revealing the enormous intellectual effort involved, as well as the Ben Yehudas' tireless efforts to raise the funding to create the 17 volumes, including the great introduction.

The letters have also allowed scholars to correct mistakes and legends, and above all to shed light on Ben Yehuda's heroic work not only in making Hebrew the most important asset of the Jews in pre-state Israel, but in creating the first scientific Hebrew dictionary.

At first, Ben Yehuda only published columns featuring dictionary entries in eight issues of his newspaper, *Hazewi*. Only later did he decide to publish a dictionary to help Hebrew speakers of the day, who lacked so many words.

When he searched for funding, he turned to leading Zionist figures such as Menachem Ussishkin and Ahad Ha'am. When he was refused, he approached non-Zionist organizations such as the Alliance in Paris and Ezra in Berlin. They agreed to support his work if scholars and experts were allowed to examine and evaluate the dictionary's entries.

Ben Yehuda asked renowned scholars in Jerusalem and Europe – the latter mainly from Germany, France and Hungary – to write their opinion on the samples he sent them. The list of these experts was long; it included professors Wilhelm Bacher, Abraham Berliner, Ignác Goldziher, Moses Gaster, Édouard Dhorme, Gustaf Dalman, Israël Lévi, Rudolf Kittel and Samuel Krauss.

The reviews were full of appreciation, some even enthusiastic. After his dialogue with the scholars, Ben Yehuda decided to change the dictionary from a practical dictionary into a scientific-historical work. As Hemda Ben Yehuda wrote in her letter to Leven:

“Mr. Ben Yehuda has just finished his dictionary and it is complete. He has nothing more to add as he exhausted all of Hebrew literature from the Bible to the present day. This dictionary that began 25 years ago as a popular book has been converted by Ben Yehuda into a scientific work after repeated requests from many scientists who completely lacked this kind of tool.

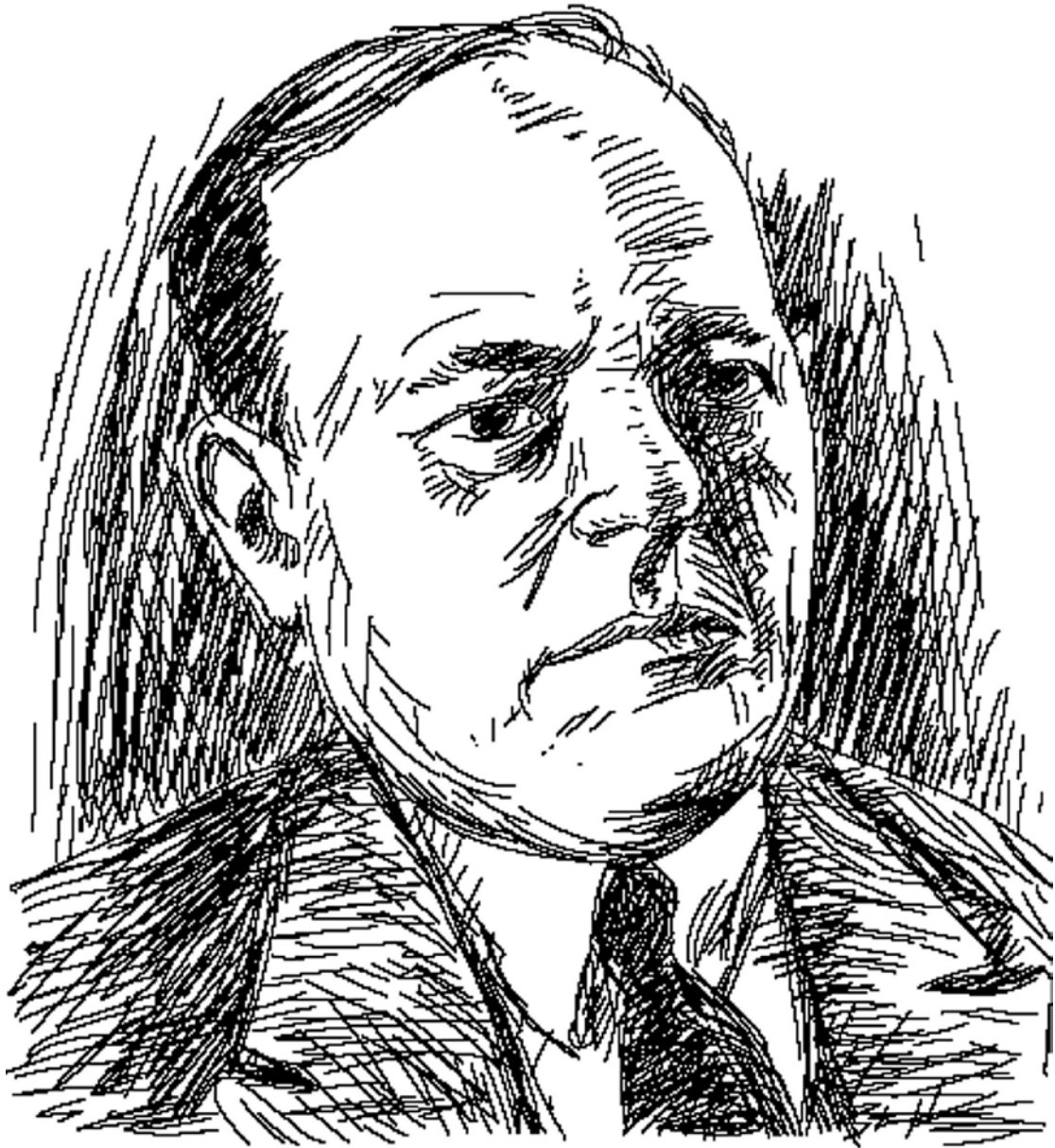
“To achieve this goal, he examined all the Hebrew and Jewish scientific literature over the past 40 years, as well as the manuscripts in the libraries of London, Berlin, Munich, Paris, Parma, Florence and the like. The entries were examined by the most competent authorities in the field ... and all of them without exception determined that the work is of great scientific value.”



Pupils participate in a gymnastics class at the Alliance Junior High School in Ramat Aviv, in 1970. Credit: Fritz Cohen / GPO

There may have been a dash of jealousy, because Bialik also coined his share of modern Hebrew words, though far fewer than Ben Yehuda did.

But these opinions clashed with the indifferent and even hostile attitude of the Zionist cultural leadership, including none other than Haim Nahman Bialik, now celebrated as Israel's national poet. It's not clear where Bialik's hostility came from. There may have been a dash of jealousy, because Bialik also coined his share of modern Hebrew words, though far fewer than Ben Yehuda did.



An illustration of Haim Nahman Bialik. Credit: Eran Wolkovsky

Bialik not only harshly criticized Ben Yehuda's innovations, he vehemently opposed the creation of a dictionary by one person, even though he must have known the historical precedents of Émile Littré in France and the Brothers Grimm in the German Confederation. In this piece, entitled "Hevle Lashon" – and later omitted from volumes of Bialik's writings – the poet wrote that the dictionary project required "more than the capabilities of just one Ben Yehuda."

In 1932, 10 years after Ben Yehuda's death and after the first eight volumes of his magnum opus had been published, Bialik was still dismissive of the dictionary. He wrote: "It is not in the power of one single man to do this work."

The response of Bialik's right-hand man, Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, was just as dismissive, even though he only saw the dictionary's manuscript. Ravnitzky wrote in a letter: "I believe that it is not yet the time to edit such a dictionary."

It's not hard to understand the severe despair that seized Ben Yehuda. As he wrote to Bacher: "My esteemed friend will believe me that there are moments when terrible despair comes over me, at times even insanity, and then horrible anger consumes me.

"And in those moments I'm almost ready to burn the whole thing and destroy it until nothing remains, because I can't see any possibility to continue my work in building this magnificent enterprise that I have dreamed of. I will impatiently wait for his answer. Please sir, save this undertaking from demise."

6503

Jerusalem
Benzéouda.

N°

-8 MARS 1906

Le C^a est de l'Alliance, après avoir examiné
 la demande que v. lui adresser par votre lettre du
 24 Schébat, a décidé de ~~vous~~ ^{Maintenant qu'on ne peut plus} aller ~~en~~
 la fin de l'année 1906, l'Alliance
 cette année, mais pour la dernière fois,
 une somme de fr. 500 qui avait été accordée.
~~Toute demande ultérieure tenant sans objet~~
 N. prions M. Antebi de v. venir le
 montant du 1^{er} trimestre, soit fr. 125.

Mais cette allocation
 ne peut pas s'appliquer
 à l'Alliance en
 l'absence de votre
 réponse sur
 votre lettre du 24
 Schébat
 et en l'absence
 de votre réponse
 sur votre lettre
 du 24 Schébat

~~je n'en aurais et
 ne pourrais être
 accordé à prolongation
 de la~~

A letter from Alliance to Ben Yeduha written in 3.8.1906. Credit: Alliance Archives

Ben Yehuda complained about the extreme workload and mentioned that he couldn't afford research assistants to copy onto index cards the fruit of his research. In a letter to Bigart in February 1906, he wrote that he had already reached about half a million index cards.

But fortunately Ben Yehuda didn't get discouraged and continued to stand night and day at his upright writing desk, a tiny sickly man, "exhausted after laboring for 25 years from four in the morning until midnight," as Hemda Ben Yehuda wrote to Leven.

The feeling that time was pressing was clear in her almost panic-stricken letters to Paris and Berlin in June 1907. It's possible that Hemda was trying to push Ezra and the Alliance to make a decision on funding the dictionary. Undoubtedly, some of the urgency stemmed from anxiety about Ben Yehuda's deteriorating health.

In the end, Ezra and the Alliance agreed to provide financing, and on December 8, 1908, Hazewi put out an ad announcing the publishing of the first volume "at Prof. Langenscheidt's great publishing house."

This prestigious institution in Berlin, which specialized in dictionaries, originally declined Hemda Ben Yehuda's request. When it finally changed its mind, it required the couple not only to meet a strict schedule but also to pay for the printing.

Still, Hemda agreed to the terms, maybe because of the sense that time was fleeting, coupled with the realization that she and her husband wouldn't find another publisher.

In her book "War with the Devil," whose manuscript is kept in the Central Zionist Archives, Hemda Ben Yehuda wrote: "My heart is full of anxiety, and I can't tell anyone, not even the children, what I have committed to." The Ben Yehudas, especially Hemda, had to work hard to finance every volume of the dictionary. Her letter to Bacher on June 26, 1907, suggests that their efforts were bearing fruit.

For a short while it seemed the couple had achieved peace, but soon it became clear that the funding that Langenscheidt requested to put out the remaining volumes had not yet been secured.

The attempts to raise funding continued after Ben Yehuda's death in 1922. According to Hemda's angry and sarcastic letter to Middle East expert Abraham Shalom Yahuda at the beginning of 1910, the Ben Yehudas didn't have the money to feed their children, whom they had to send to Hemda's brother in Switzerland.

The Ben Yehudas didn't have the money to feed their children, whom they had to send to Hemda's brother in Switzerland.

“But the day will come when they will know that Ben Yehuda has sacrificed so much. We’ve parted with the children we love more than ourselves; we’ve parted with them because we didn’t have bread to feed them! ... We have paid the assistant for three notebooks. Would Prof. Warburg want us to steal to pay for the next notebooks? ... We shall fight, as in war, as long as there is a drop of blood in our veins! Torture Ben Yehuda, all of you, as much as you can!”

Ben Yehuda almost gave up on the dictionary. He told Abraham Shalom Yahuda in a letter dated July 7, 1910, that he had waited in vain for promised funding and feared that he would have to give up. “I didn’t know what would happen, and here came a telegram from Mrs. Ben Yehuda in Versoix to leave everything and go there. And this bad dream of the dictionary was over.”

The situation got even worse; World War I interrupted the publishing of volumes for more than 10 years. Ben Yehuda left for the United States and returned only in 1919, so he used those years to write his great introduction to the dictionary.

Ben Yehuda lived to see the first five volumes of the dictionary come out. He accompanied the sixth volume up to the printing process and completed the writing of the seventh.

After his death, the sixth, seventh and eighth volumes were published in Berlin. The steel plates for the pages of the ninth volume were sent over from Germany, and the volume was published in 1939. Prof. Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai’s noble help allowed the remaining volumes to be published; the final two came out in 1959.

Only later did the dictionary gain recognition as a key asset of the national culture, as can be seen not only in the immortalization of Ben Yehuda in Israel, but also in the help of the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency and the Histadrut labor federation in publishing the popular edition of the dictionary.

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