

The Hebrew Language as a Unifying Factor for the Jewish People

Nationality is a word which has never adequately been defined though language has generally been considered an essential component, and in some instances — witness Switzerland with its four languages or Canada with its two, or Belgium with its two — a periodic source of division and strife.

The Jews, however, are not a nation as other nations. Observe the millions of Russian Jews who, through no fault of their own, were isolated for an entire generation from the mainstream of world Jewry, deprived of land, language and religion. How, given every kind of environmental pressure, the spark of life in "Am Yisrael" was never extinguished, we cannot tell. What we do know is that in practice the Jewish renaissance began with individuals,

then groups, learning Hebrew in private homes. For these pioneers of the Jewish revival who suffered from a chronic lack of books, Hebrew was something to be aspired to, to acquire by a struggle with the environment. The acquisition of Hebrew expressed the recovery of Jewish identity, which led to the study of Jewish history and religion, to the active struggle for Aliya, and to the practice of a Jewish way of life.

In Israel, the native born Israeli has all these components of Judaism available without struggle: the Hebrew language is his from birth, as is the Land of Israel.

Within the free world of America, Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Hebrew is potentially the common language of Jews worldwide, but it does not come naturally — it has to be acquired. Israeli activists (to borrow a term) do their share, as "shlimim", towards helping Jewish communities in the Diaspora set up and staff Jewish schools offering courses in Hebrew language and in Jewish studies.

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Hebrew, the language of prayer and study, remained an international language throughout the ages. Taught the Hebrew alphabet at the age of 3, one might later study Bible and possibly the *Mishnah* in the original. This was not only achieved through classes and courses, but by father teaching son, and eldest son teaching younger brother and sister.

The irresistible force motivating study was the need to acquire an understanding of basic Jewish texts which were to be perpetuated at all cost. The drive and practice are still in evidence today in the larger cities throughout the world, with undiminished strength. But a parallel force developed at the end of the 18th and through the 19th century — the *Haskala* movement, the so-called Age of Enlightenment which accompanied the emancipation movement of the Jews in Europe. This movement provided a powerful impetus to the Hebrew language, (particularly in the field of literature). Focus and motive both switched radically. From an instrument for the study of Jewish texts and of Judaism, the study of Hebrew became an end in itself. At least three Hebrew translations of Dickens' novels were produced in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The study of Hebrew language as an end in itself cannot be a basis for a popular international movement.

In Israel, the Hebrew language is an indispensable tool for practical daily living. In the Diaspora, the vernacular serves that purpose. Orthodox Jews will continue to use Hebrew as an instrument for study and prayer. Non-

practicing Jews cannot be expected to pursue the study of Hebrew without some personal motivation, whether as preparation for aliya, or within a university's Near Eastern Department, or in the pursuit of Hebrew Language and Literature, or even as a gimmick offered by travel agents to help sell their package tours to Israel. Used for these ends, Hebrew is not a factor in the unification of the Jewish People.

David Ben-Gurion's exhortation to learn Hebrew at every gathering of Diaspora Jews he addressed was certainly in order. Hebrew should be the common language of Jews worldwide. But to achieve this there must be popular motivation. Hebrew, in isolation, is no more than Irish or Welsh.

If there is to be any chance of propagating the Hebrew language outside Israel, so that it becomes a major factor in unifying the people, we in the West must emulate the recovery of Jewish identity which has been achieved by a nucleus of Russian Jews, a recovery based on the awareness that Jewishness cannot be isolated from the language of the Land, the Land from the people, nor the people from their Judaism. I take the liberty of quoting from a private communication made to me by the late father of Noam Avram Chomsky, Ze'ev Chomsky, who was a pillar of Hebrew Language study in America, "I gave Noam a thorough Hebrew education. Unfortunately I did not give him a Jewish education". Hebrew will come into its own when we cease to isolate the language from the Jewish sources from which it sprang.

From Commitment to Zionism: The Diaspora and Israel

One often hears of the "commitment" of Diaspora Jews to Israel, a commitment that is expressed in such widely differing ways that one wonders whether what is involved is not a variety of Jewish identities as they are reflected in their identification with Israel; or simply, due to the inescapable centrality of Israel in contemporary Jewish life, "commitment" must be referred to as an essential building-block of Jewish identity. Indeed, it is astonishing to find Jews who have outwardly shed all trappings of Jewishness but still clamor about sympathy for Israel, while others, who regard themselves as Jewish in their bones, are critical of Israel. Some are afraid or embarrassed to wave a Jewish banner in public, but in an inner circle speak out for Judaism and Israel; others

would rather display their Judaism in the open while justifying and rationalizing the Diaspora as a viable antithesis of Israel.

The division between those who are committed sympathizers and the non-committed can not be identified along a religious/non-religious line, nor does the dividing line demarcate affiliated from non-affiliated Jews. (Some religious Jews who are not affiliated, harbor positive sentiments toward Israel while affiliated non-religious Jews count themselves among its harsh critics.) It appears, however, that while non-religious Jews find it not too difficult as a step towards full merger into the host society to detach and eventually alienate themselves from anything Jewish or Israeli, religious Jews face a real problem. Going to Eretz Israel and living there is a tenet of the faith. Failing to do so can be rationalized by claiming service owed to the community or moneys raised or contributed to the local Jewish community and to Israel, or public opin-

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