

The Resurrection of Hebrew

After the exile of the Jewish people from Israel in 70 AD, Hebrew began to die out as a spoken language though it continued to be used in synagogue worship. The Jewish dream of returning to the land after two thousand years of exile began in 1881 when European Jews began to resettle in what was then called Palestine. At that time most European Jews spoke a dialect called Yiddish.

Some also came from other parts of the world which meant that the Jews who resettled Israel did not have a common language; but the time was to come when Hebrew, the language of their prayers, would become the language of the country.

This did not happen overnight. All beginnings are hard, and conservatives were adamant that the language of Torah was not a language that could be spoken in the street. That was the situation until a man of extraordinary passion, single-handedly resurrected Hebrew as a modern language. Growing up in Russia, Eliezer Perelman, who later changed his name to Ben Yehuda, was a brilliant yeshiva student. (A yeshiva is a centre for religious studies). But Eliezer's passion for the Hebrew language had little to do with religion. The nationalism he saw rising in Europe convinced him that it was high time for the Jewish people to revive their native land and language. Although he studied in a yeshiva, one of his Rabbis, a secret "*maskil*" (or enlightened Jew), caused him to change course and become a free thinker and a revolutionary.

However, at the age of seventeen he had an overwhelming revelation that was to decide his course in life. He wrote these words: **"It was as if the heavens had suddenly opened, and a clear incandescent light flashed before my eyes and a mighty inner voice sounded in my ears: the renaissance of Israel on its ancestral soil. The more the nationalist concept grew in me the more I realized what a common language is to a nation..."** Only a 17 year-old could believe that he could forge a movement of seven million Yiddish-speaking Jews who would leave Europe and speak a new language.

Ben Yehuda knew that Hebrew had once been the daily language of his people. They had told jokes, sold horses, and courted each other in this language. When the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were scattered throughout the world, they abandoned Hebrew for the languages of their respective countries. It was like Babel all over again. Hebrew was restricted to sacred texts and prayer. The ancient tongue became a substitute for the land of Israel, a sweet reminder of a time when Jews were safe and proud of their place in the world.

When the young scholar began to write of his dream of a spoken Hebrew, his fiercest opponents were Orthodox Jews who believed that the idea of saying, "Take out the garbage" in Hebrew was sacrilege. Ben Yehuda was unmoved by this because he felt he had left the rigidity of the traditional world in favour of an enlightened Judaism. For him Yiddish was the language of poverty and oppression, the language of exile.

Making Aliyah

In 1881, he left for Palestine with his young wife, Deborah, determined to become a modern Jew. That he had tuberculosis and that doctors had told him his remaining years would be few was simply another obstacle to be overcome. He felt called to

bring land, language and people together. The land needed the language and the language needed the land. To Eliezer, Hebrew was more than a means of communication; it embodied a Jew's very spirit and uniqueness.

On the way to Israel Ben Yehuda told his wife Deborah that they would never speak any language but Hebrew again. Their children would be the first Hebrew speakers in 2000 years. The fact that she couldn't speak the language and that he himself could barely speak it was a trifling hindrance. After all, he been diagnosed with a terminal illness. He was racing against time and there could not be any gradual way.

When they arrived in Jaffa, one of Eliezer's cherished illusions was shattered. The land wasn't empty; it was filled with dark-skinned Arabs. He later wrote these words to describe his shock. **"I am a foreigner. My feet stood on the holy ground, the land of my ancestors, and in my heart there was no joy. I stood shocked."** He soon received another shock but this time of a different nature when the driver of the cart that took them to Jerusalem spoke Hebrew to his horse! It was then that Ben-Yehuda discovered there were Jews in Palestine who still spoke Hebrew! Proof that there had been a continuous Jewish presence in the land, albeit a very small remnant.

Opposition

Ben Yehuda introduced modern Hebrew to the first European settlers. This he did as a journalist by writing in simple Hebrew with a dictionary accompanying his weekly newspaper. The extreme Orthodox Jews, angered by his paper's reports of corruption in the distribution of their funding allocations, deliberately mistranslated a line in a Chanukah story in his paper, "Let us gather strength and go forward" to mean "Let us gather an army and proceed against the East." They used it as a pretext to inform the ruling Turkish authorities that Ben Yehuda was calling his followers to revolt! He was arrested, charged with conspiracy and sentenced to a year's imprisonment. Jews throughout the world were outraged. His sentence was appealed and he was eventually released.

While the Orthodox community continued to throw stones at him he kept his dream alive by beginning to write a dictionary of Hebrew that was destined to become his life's work. Settlers changed their westernised names to Hebrew names. Thus Grien became Ben Gurion, and Perelman became Ben Yehuda. In Torah, names change as people change. Abram became Abraham. So too did these pioneers reflect a new kind of Jew, ready to struggle in a new land as a free people.

And it was a *mighty* struggle. A barren land, blazing heat, malaria! They didn't even have a language they could *kvetch* in! Ben Yehuda was so single-minded he didn't want his children to hear anything, not even birdsong, if it wasn't in Hebrew. Like the narrative of the bible which revolves around people and families, so the Hebrew language was revived in a home. Ironically his first child, Ittamar, was still mute at age five, seemingly without any language. Deborah's friends told her it was because his parents could barely speak Hebrew, so they suggested that she speak to him in any language that came from her heart.

One day Ben Yehuda left the house for a trip to Jaffa and she began to sing Russian lullabies to her son. Ben Yehuda had forgotten something and returned to the house in time to hear her singing. Ittamar later wrote, **"I'll never forget that moment, when**

my father's rage and my mother's tears loosened my tongue and I began to speak." Because there were children in the house Ben Yehuda was forced to coin new Hebrew words for objects such as doll, ice-cream, jelly, omelette, handkerchief, towel, bicycle, and hundreds more. He borrowed from modern Arabic and ancient Hebrew.

Ittamar ultimately finished his father's dictionary, making the language so rich and expressive that scientists, poets, lovers, and schoolchildren alike spoke a Hebrew expanded from 8,000 words to 100,000.

Ben Yehuda's wife, Deborah, died of tuberculosis in 1891. Six months later, her younger sister offered to marry Ben Yehuda and care for Deborah's two small children. An emancipated woman of great drive and conviction, she made it her life's work to support Eliezer and his enterprise. Adopting the Hebrew name Hemdah, she learned Hebrew fluently in record time, became a reporter for his paper, and in time took over as editor, in order to allow Eliezer to concentrate on his research of the lost Hebrew words that the reborn tongue required. She also became his chief fund-raiser.

Ben Yehuda worked 18 hours a day on his "*Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*." In 1910 he published the first of six volumes that saw light before his death in 1922, and after his death his widow and son Ehud continued publishing his manuscript, a task which was completed as late as 1959 and consisted of 17 volumes. The dictionary lists all the words used in Hebrew literature from the time of Abraham to modern times. Eliezer Ben Yehuda was fortunate enough to see his dream become a reality: *A modern nation speaking an ancient tongue*.

Despite the doctors' fatal diagnosis, when Ben-Yehuda died at age 65, he had fathered (perhaps significantly) twelve children and a language that would take its place among the spoken languages of the modern world. If he could have attended his own funeral, he might have been amused. In life he had fought with many different groups. He never would have won a popularity contest. But at his funeral, 30,000 people came to pay their respects and the government declared three days of national mourning. His influence continued to grow after his death. Today Israeli television bears Hebrew sub-titles for American sitcoms. Hebrew novels have won the Nobel Prize for literature. All this in a little over 100 years. Many told Ben Yehuda it couldn't be done and many told him it shouldn't be done. Happily, he didn't listen. Instead, he reunited the Jewish people with their ancient language and at the same time gave them a voice in the modern world.

Tongue of the Prophets

The last word he worked on in his dictionary was "*nefesh*," which means "soul." This is the part of a human being that makes us unique. It is also the part which connects us to God and exists forever. The *nefesh* in Eliezer Ben Yehuda gave his body the strength to survive long enough to revive the language the Jewish people believe God spoke to create the world. The prophet Zephaniah in *Zeph 3:9* declared, **"For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him shoulder to shoulder."** Is it a coincidence that this verse contains all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet?