

From the Language of G-d to the Language of the Devil

On the Struggle of Orthodoxy Against the Hebrew Language

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It is over a hundred years—with interruptions, of course, and with varying degrees of resolve and fervor—that non-Zionistic Ashkenazic Orthodoxy has been waging a war against the revival of the Hebrew language, enlisting a respectable gallery of rabbis in its struggle. The events of this “war” are an important chapter in the historical struggle between tradition and renewal or, as they perceived it, the usurping of tradition. Also, when we integrate the broad variety of allegations against the Hebrew language in the different stages of this war, we create a mirror that reflects an inverted image of the language. The revivers and designers of Modern Hebrew were not always conscious of the types of changes that took place during the process of renewal, thus our study of the ultra-Orthodox war reveals an instructive and sometimes unfamiliar portrait of the Hebrew language.

The first phase of the war and the most familiar, the phase that has been faithfully researched and has inspired many written works, started in Jerusalem in 1889 and extended for about thirty years, ending with the First World War. In 1889 Ben Yehuda and his colleagues established the Safa Berura [Fluent Language] society, whose purpose was to find women who spoke Hebrew and hire them to teach the girls and women.¹ This struggle was an integral part of the desperate and tenacious rear-guard battle waged by the heads of the Old Yishuv [the term generally accepted for the non-Zionistic Ashkenazic ultra-Orthodox community of the time, mainly in Jerusalem] against modernity. To them, modernity represented a liberated, secular perspective and way of life. The local maskilim [enlightened ones] and young olim [immigrants] of Jerusalem at the time, flaunted the banner of national secular culture and attempted to instill the teaching of secular studies and foreign languages to boys and girls in progressive schools; all of this was, of course, anathema to the Old Yishuv.² It is clear that the especially fierce quality of the struggle against spoken Hebrew arose mainly from the personal animosity of the heads of the Old Yishuv to Eliezer Ben Yehuda, their bitter rival, whose aspirations to renew the language and secularize it were the spearhead of the general movement for enlightenment and secular nationalism.

The Jerusalem opponents of the Hebrew language utilized a collection of arguments in their polemics that were eventually formulated and condensed in two public statements or proclamations. These proclamations were published much later, after the British conquest, when the cultural battle had already been lost. The British elevated the Zionist leadership as the sole representatives of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel and, as a result, the Hebrew language triumphed over the other languages of the Jews. The two proclamations were recycled and published in different variations as the Jerusalem zealots

attempted to renew the polemics and return the Hebrew-language issue to the public agenda of the Jews, or at least to unite their own dwindling ranks round this controversy. Their arguments take two forms: a traditional ideology in old-fashioned formulation, and an instrumental set of new arguments in pseudo-modern jargon.

The essence of the traditional argument is distilled in a proclamation signed by the three main spokesmen of ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem of the time: Rabbi Yitzchak Yerucham Diskin, who basked in the borrowed holy aura of his father, Yehuda Leib Diskin known as the "Ga'on of Brisk" and the head of Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox community of the previous generation; Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the advocate who drew his strength from the authority of Chatam Sofer's renowned rabbinical seminary; and Rabbi Moshe Nahum Wallenstein, a well-known Jerusalem religious judge. The proclamation is dated Cheshvan 5679, the end of 1918, less than a year after Jerusalem had been conquered by the British. The proclamation is traditional both in its graphic format as well as its formulation, and the statement is less a plea to the public than a platform for portraying the beliefs of its signatories.

The rabbis crowned their proclamation with a daas Torah, or a judgment that obligates the reader since the proclamation has the force of a Jewish religious law, or psak halakha, although it is not based on traditional halakhic literature.³ The text reads:

We find in our souls the great and holy obligation, together with the highest rabbinical authorities [Ga'onim], to establish a [secondary] fence around the holy Torah. [...] Any innovation is like tainted meat, an unwanted abomination. Especially objectionable is the change that was fabricated by the so-called "renewers," who want to exchange our entire Torah for idle talk. Instead of studying our holy Torah and observing its commandments, they took the holy language of Hebrew only to do harm, and not to do good.

In other words, Hebrew is forbidden (according to these protectors of the faith) not because of any of the intrinsic qualities but because this use is an act of innovation, and its use for "idle talk" is disrespectful in light of the abundant wisdom of the Torah. The prohibition against instituting any change in the area of the spoken language draws its sanctity from the deeds of Bnai Yisrael [Children of Israel] enslaved in Egypt, "who did not change their language" (Va-yikra Raba 32: 5) and thus were redeemed from bondage. Ironically, these guardians of the "fences" of religious tradition and who repeatedly quote the words of the midrash in their proclamations, miss the irony in the fact that their forefathers earn this praise because they did not change their language from Hebrew to Egyptian, but retained their spoken Hebrew language.

The second, later proclamation carries the title "Thou shalt not let your daughter pass over to a school that teaches Hebrew," which is supposed to evoke in the readers the biblical verse, "Thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through (the fire) to Molekh." (Leviticus 18:21) This proclamation lists a whole

string of arguments against speaking Hebrew. Among these is their resistance to allowing women, especially female children and teenagers, learn the Hebrew language. The issue of women as Hebrew speakers remained problematic for the advocates and opponents of Modern Hebrew, from the founding of the Safa Berura onward because religious Jewish men have always learned Hebrew from their studies and their prayers, areas not sanctioned for women.

The proclamation was not signed which probably indicates that the backers of the document were hotheaded young activists in one of the cliques in the ultra-Orthodox community whose avowed purpose was to prod the sleepy establishment and goad them into action. But the succinct phraseology of the proclamation is evidence that its composers were aware of the power of modern propaganda. In their opinion, the Hebrew language was coldly exploited and drafted by secular cultural nationalism to instigate wide-ranging changes in the Jewish society, or in their words: “Because of our great sins, Hebrew has been made into the ‘idol of nationalism’ in exchange for our holy Torah, to make Israel become as one of the nations, may G-d save us.”

The beginning of the proclamation above seems to resemble the previous proclamation of the “holy synod,” but afterwards the authors change their style to one that is clear, decisive, and almost modern:

Hebrew—is the weapon of the secular ones.

Hebrew—is the vehicle to secularism.

Hebrew—will make your daughter feel overly clever in her own eyes and will rob her of the innocence and simple faith of our matriarchs.

Hebrew—prepares your daughter to read foreign books and magazines that are filled with the poisons of hereticism and lewdness, and to consort with immoral associates.

Hebrew—a girl who learns Hebrew will not become one of the worthy women who sacrifices to let her husband dedicate his life to Torah.

Hebrew—prepares your daughter to be sucked into a whirlpool of profligate behavior in movie-houses and parties by loud billboards that call to gullible people from every wall.

Hebrew—its purpose is to cause our daughters to mix among the secularists. This is the exact opposite of our forefathers who toiled to increase the modesty of our daughters and to fence them in so that they should not turn into wanton women and chatterboxes and to fulfill the adage, “the king’s daughter is all glorious within.” (Tehillim 4:14).

Hebrew—lures your daughter to follow the newfangled fads of the time.

Neither of the proclamations cited above criticize the essence of Hebrew as a language. Hebrew is still characterized by clear signs of the holiness of the biblical language, but this holiness is seen as exploited or defiled by strangers. Three statements by three of the important Jerusalem rabbis deserve special interest regarding this issue. The most scathing of them is that of Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim (known as the Aderet), who served along with Rabbi Shmuel Salant as the Ashkenazic rabbi of Jerusalem. Apparently, the Aderet was not impressed by the Zionistic ways of his son-in-law, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hacohen Kook, later Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem claiming, “He [Rabbi Kook] and his household have accepted the ways of the secularists and they talk only in Hebrew.”⁴ In 1905, a short time before his death, he penned a diatribe against the “inciters and instigators that teach in the secular schools,” and entrusted it with the Jerusalem maggid [preacher], Rav Ben-Zion Yadler.⁵

According to the Aderet, modern Hebrew bears some signs of ritual purity, but these are overshadowed by an impurity that is invisible, buried deep inside. In effect, the Aderet indirectly compares the status of Modern Hebrew to that of the pig in Jewish religious lore, which has only two of the three attributes of the ritually pure animal [Leviticus 11:7]. The pig has split hooves and is cloven-hoofed, but since it does not chew its cud it is, in fact, impure. The midrash explains the particular danger posed by the pig since it can fool the public and lead them astray by exhibiting all the outward signs of purity, while concealing an inner, hidden impurity. (cf. Va-yikra Raba 13:5). The pig, which traditionally represented Esau and the evil Edomite Empire in Jewish culture, is transformed by the Aderet’s legacy into the symbol of the maskilim [enlightened ones] and the secularists who proudly use Hebrew as the visible sign of their purity, when in fact they hide the essential impurity of their real nature.

In another example, Rabbi Yitzchak Yerucham Diskin compared the status of the renewed Hebrew language to the status of the Ten Commandments, which, despite the high regard they originally enjoyed in Judaism, also fell into disfavor. According to the Mishna (Massechet Tamid, Chapter 5, Mishne 1), the kohanim [priests] performing the early morning service would recite the Ten Commandments before the Tamid sacrifice. In the daily prayers, the Ten Commandments were recited before the Kriyat Shma [the Shma prayer] to emphasize the concept of the absolute unity of the G-d of Israel and the negation of the existence of other gods. But the special status of the Ten Commandments was undermined over time, and eventually, the recitation was abolished by both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds. According to the Jerusalem Talmud, the custom of publicly reading the Ten Commandments was abolished because their public reading seemed to accord them a special, preferred status over the rest of the Torah and the commandments, while the Babylonia Talmud maintains that the Ten Commandments had been adopted by the apostates and the Christians and revered by them as the epitome of their dogma.⁶

The opinion of Rabbi Diskin “the son” perpetuated the comparison of Modern Hebrew to the Ten Commandments. Dovid Baharan cites him in his public statement in 1933, entitled “Daas Torah.” Rabbi Diskin felt that the secularists adopted the Hebrew language in an attempt to replace the entire Torah with “idle talk.” Therefore, he concludes, we are required today to abolish Modern Hebrew just as the rabbis abolished the recitation of the Ten Commandments because of the influence of the heretics and the Christians:

The Ga’on Rabbi Diskin, of blessed memory, has already said that just as our sages abolished the recitation of the Ten Commandments even though [the kohanim] had recited it in the Temple before Kriyat Shma ...so that the apostates should not say: there is no Torah except for [the Ten Commandments]-- how much more so is it forbidden today to speak Hebrew [the language of the secularists].

Another rabbi who discusses the Hebrew issue, Rabbi Shmuel Salant, was the most salient and consistent personage in the history of Ashkenazic Jerusalem for nearly seventy years (1841-1909) unifying and molding the Old Yishuv. Rabbi Salant compared the status of Hebrew to wine which enjoys a central role in various religious ceremonies: “Special affection is accorded to [wine] in the commandments of the Torah, in kiddush and havdala, in grace after meals and other commandments.” But wine can “...be prohibited if the hand of a non-Jew touches it, thereby desecrating it. This is not the case for other beverages: only wine can be defiled in this way.” Rabbi Yoseph Chaim Sonnenfeld expanded upon this idea of defilement offering scriptural justification. “This language, even if it is totally holy, has been defiled because the Sabbath transgressors have attached themselves to it. Those who observe the Torah and commandments are forbidden [to speak Hebrew], as is alluded to in, “Your palate is like good wine” (Song of Songs 7:10).”⁷

To summarize, although Hebrew in its essence is the “holy tongue” and represents purity, it has been defiled because of its contact with apostates and secularists. The bitter destiny of the Hebrew language, which has been defiled and taken prisoner, awakens misgivings and pangs of conscience in Rabbi Yoseph Chaim Sonnenfeld. In a rare moment of candor, Rabbi Sonnenfeld confesses his concerns to his disciple, Rabbi Moshe Blau, leader of the Jerusalem Agudat Yisrael, and wonders if, perhaps, they had been short-sighted in their response. Regarding the use of Hebrew as the official language of instruction at the She’erit Yisrael Talmud Torah in Petach Tikvah he said:

You know something? Perhaps we ourselves made a mistake in that, when we arrived in Eretz Israel, we did not decide to speak in the holy tongue. Then we would have preceded the secularists, thus depriving them of their most potent weapon.” And later on he invoked a psalm to make the following point: “I shall not die “ [Psalms 118], by doing nothing, instead, “But live,” by taking action and “Declare the works of the Lord.” Since there is no innate prohibition [to speaking Hebrew], perhaps we should have taken the initiative [and adopted Hebrew first], and then we wouldn’t have had to

forbid its use when the secularists adopted Hebrew themselves and made it a fundamental part of their beliefs.⁸

Rabbi Zonnenfeld had refused to prohibit Hebrew many years earlier, when the zealots of Jerusalem asked him to include Hebrew in Rabbi Diskin's ban on foreign languages. In his memoirs, Rabbi Yadler described Rabbi Zonnenfeld's uncompromising refusal to ban the Hebrew language:

In one of my conversations with the Gaon Rabbi Zonnenfeld, I asked him what is the reason for his silence regarding the use of Hebrew and even showed him the personal letter of the Aderet in which he wrote that it is forbidden to speak Hebrew. Rabbi Zonnenfeld answered that the Aderet's letter reflected only his personal opinion and did not necessarily include the sages of Jerusalem and the heads of the Beit Din [Jewish court of religious law]. "But if I affix my own agreement, together with the Jerusalem sages and the Beit Din, then it will, indeed, become a transgression of the words of the sages. This would bring about the magnification of the transgressor's punishment in Gehinnom [purgatory], and I have no desire to do this as I see that many have gone astray and raise their sons in this way [in speaking Hebrew]. Therefore, I choose to remain silent."⁹

Thus, in Eretz Israel, in the very battlefield itself, the Orthodox denunciation of Hebrew slowly began to die. One reason was a halakhic rationale, as intimated by Rabbi Zonnenfeld above, which was embodied in the words of the Talmud: "Leave [the children of] Israel alone: it is better that they commit a sin unintentionally than they commit it intentionally" (Beitza 30a). And, in fact, the ranks of Jerusalem Orthodoxy dwindled vis-à-vis the strengthening of secular nationalism and its central form of expression—Hebrew.

Eastern Europe, however, remained the center of Jewish Orthodoxy and many of its leaders labored to develop a new generation of weapons against the new language of the enemy. They viewed Modern Hebrew from afar, without having to directly confront the facts of its renaissance or deal with it as an official language on a day-to-day basis. Instead they scrutinized it from the outside, almost without sentiments. They did not perceive it as the Jerusalemites saw it--as the holy tongue whose holiness had been defiled or the daughter who has strayed from her home. Rather, they viewed it as an utterly new, unwanted, foreign creation. This conceptual revolution took place entirely through the Hassidic wing of Judaism and their spokesmen the Admors or rebbes [Hassidic rabbis]. This is not surprising because the elite members of the Misnaged movement [the opponents of Hassidim] in Lithuania and Russia had, from at least the middle of the nineteenth century, exhibited a measure of moderation and openness towards the changes that were taking place around them. They displayed an inclination to continue the dialogue with the ever-increasing ranks of maskilim. The Hassidim and their leaders, on the other hand, continued to isolate and entrench themselves in the old modes of segregation, resistance and distrust.

The first Hasidic leaders who rose up against Modern Hebrew were the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rebbe Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson and his son Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe. In 1916, about four years before his death, Rebbe Shalom Dov Ber wrote a detailed letter to several rabbis.¹⁰ At the beginning of the letter he added his support to the ultra-Orthodox opposition regarding reviving Hebrew as a spoken language. Most of the letter is composed of erudite, well-reasoned religious rationales, accompanied by the citing of many sources to explain why the very essence of Hebrew cannot be transformed into a spoken language:

The holy tongue is the language of Torah and not the language of a nation. In other words, the holy tongue is an essential [G-dly] language that should not be a tool of man. In this way it is distinguished from all other languages. With all other languages that are spoken by humans, the nation preceded the language, but the holy tongue preceded all creation.

After establishing this basic premise, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe turns to history to find proof and evidence that Hebrew, the holy language that was dedicated only to Torah and holy matters, was almost never the language of a nation. Of course he is forced to admit that Hebrew was spoken during the time of the first temple, “As can be deduced from the book of 2 Kings, 18:26.” However, the rabbi maintains that Hebrew was spoken “only” then “because all of G-d’s nation were holy.” The ensuing decline of the generations, accompanied by the attenuation of holiness explains the corresponding sharp curtailment of the use of Hebrew. According to Rebbe Shalom Dov, the Tannaim and Amoraim (teachers of Mishna and Talmud respectively) continued to speak Hebrew, but the general population spoke other languages as their vernacular.¹¹ After this time period, he adds, “ Even the sages no longer spoke the holy tongue. It appears that the entire world declined in its merits and virtues, therefore they abandoned the holy tongue so as not to use it in their day-to-day language.” In his opinion, the Rishonim [early commentators] wrote their texts in other languages, like the Rambam who wrote all his books (except for the Yad HaChazaka or Mishne Torah) in Arabic. The fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe concludes his historical survey with the following words:

What, then, can we say about our lowly generation, when most talk is only idle chatter, how can one even consider that this language which is rooted in the holiest of holiness, how can this become the language of a nation for despicable and even forbidden topics? This is exactly like bringing an idol into the Temple, G-d forbid.

In the last section of his letter, the Lubavitcher Rebbe uses the language of the Jerusalem proclamations and repeats their central message: that the Zionists have “exchanged the entire Torah for their concept of nationalism ...and therefore they hold that any respectable nation also has to have its own language.” He continues:

Those who initiated and believe in the transformation of the holy tongue to a spoken language, have taken it from the holy to the profane, and therefore changed its name [to Hebrew], in order to deprive it

of its holiness. The children of Israel [B'nai Yisrael] were called Hebrews or "ivrim" before they received the Torah, but after they received the Torah, one cannot find in the Torah that they were called "Ivrim," only a slave of Israel was called "eved ivri.

These central arguments — the negation of the legitimacy of Hebrew's historical existence, and the dehumanization of Hebrew by portraying it as the language of slaves — set the ideological foundation and emotional climate for an even more bitter renunciation by his son and successor, Rabbi Yitzchak Shneerson the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, who attacked the language in even stronger terms. Twenty-seven years after his father's letter, Hebrew had become a renewed, vibrant national language and a fait accompli, but the son still intended its demonization.

The setting for the Lubavitcher Rebbe's offensive was the Seder eve of Pesach 1943. The rabbi conducted the Seder in the midst of his Hassidic disciples in New York, the venue he had chosen to rehabilitate his Hassidic court. The days were the days of the terrible destruction of European Jewry and the strengthening of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel. He launched into his diatribe against the residents of Eretz Israel and their language when they recited the Haggadah together and reached the verse, "This year we are here, next year in Eretz Israel; now we are slaves, next year we will be free men."

After reviewing the current state of the galut [Diaspora] in which the Jews found themselves in Europe and America he spoke of the galut in Eretz Israel where exile under wicked Jews was more difficult than galut under the wicked ones of the nations of the world. He then added in Yiddish:

A certain portion of the villains of Israel that have gathered in Eretz Israel try to defile three things: Jewish souls, the holiness of the land, and the holy tongue. The overpowering of the "shell" [a kabalistic symbol for the forces of evil] is so great that it draws its strength from holiness. Thus they dare to assign names from the holy tongue to their evil institutions in which they attempt to convert the children of Israel.

They take the holy tongue used by G-d to create His world and give us the Torah, and they use it to talk idle chatter and forbidden topics. Another issue is that they added so many new words that it is no longer the holy tongue, and we can only wish that they would add even more words until their language will no longer contain any words at all of the original holy tongue. Then, the forces of evil will no longer have any kind of connection to holiness.¹²

The innovation here is the kabalistic demonization of Modern Hebrew in the form of the evil "shell," which his father never mentioned. His second and more conventional argument is that Modern Hebrew is in the process of losing its connection with the original holy tongue because of its constant invention of new terms and its adoption of many words from foreign languages.

This second argument appears from the very beginning of the revival of Modern Hebrew. In 1890, Ephraim Deinard's satiric book *Floyderzak* bitterly attacks the expansion of the Hebrew vocabulary under the encouragement of Ben Yehuda. Deinard jeers:

And you, those of the holy tongue, if you think you want to speak in the holy tongue I'll tell you what to do. In every issue of the "Gedi" [allusion to the paper "HaTzvi" of Ben Yehuda] we shall mix Arabic words with Turkish, add a little Tatar as well as the language of the gypsies so that your tongues will not fail you to speak and write in real jargon. Then you can use as many words as you want until your innards fall apart [...].¹³

Another periodical, the hasidically inspired "Havazelet" from Jerusalem, repeatedly attacks Ben Yehuda's linguistic innovations. One of the journal's writers hides behind the pen name and composes these words in 1897: "HaTzvi and its writers renew words every day that are not from the seed of Israel. They have trampled upon the beautiful language with its pleasing phraseology."¹⁴ Even "Mr. Keshisha" — "Bilu-nick Avraham Moshe Cohen Hen-Tamim" — protests, in his "Lashon Remiya" column against turning Hebrew into an "ugly, despicable mess of Hebrew-Egyptian-Greek-French" and demands, "Let us not adopt a word or phrase unless it has the form or imprint of the holy tongue."¹⁵

These arguments appear time after time in attacks by Hassidic rabbis on the Hebrew language. The rabbi from Munkacs, Rabbi Chaim Eliezer Shapiro (author of "Minchat Eliezer") was considered one of the most strident and vocal opponents of Jewish secular nationalism in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. He uses two traditional arguments in his renewed attacks on the Hebrew language: that Modern Hebrew pretends to contain a holiness that it lacks, and that Modern Hebrew is not the holy tongue in any case because it has been extensively changed.¹⁶

The rabbi of Bobov, Rabbi Ben-Zion Halberstam, author of "Kedushat Zion," and one of the important Hassidic rabbis in the first half of the twentieth century, also attacks the innovations of Modern Hebrew:

"From the day that our forefathers were exiled [from our land]...all we have left of the holy tongue is what is written in the twenty-four books of the Tanach and a little of what is found in the Mishna. Therefore, it is impossible to use the holy tongue like all the other languages for our daily needs, since most of it has been lost from us. Thus the sinners have made up new words that our forefathers never imagined, and they appropriated these into the holy tongue and use it for every despicable and abominable thing, to speak words of villainy."¹⁷

The cynical wish of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Shneerson, "... that they would add even more words until their language will no longer contain any words at all of the original holy tongue," was interpreted literally by the Lubavitcher rabbis in our own time. It serves as the pretext for their use of Modern Hebrew, even colloquial Hebrew, in the publications that are geared for the general public.

The most outspoken and harsh critic among the Hassidic rabbis is undoubtedly the Rabbi of Satmar, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum. He was perceived as an extremist even among his peers and, unlike most of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox rabbis, persevered in his fight against Modern Hebrew. His "Va'Yoel Moshe," is the most detailed, reasoned halakhic essay on the part of Ashkenazi Orthodoxy against the secular national movement. In his diatribe, the rabbi more or less repeats the allegations of his greatest rival, the Lubavitcher Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak Shneerson. He writes:

Because of our many sins, the impure language that is spoken in our land is not, in the main, the holy tongue at all. I inquired into the matter and discovered that the majority of [Hebrew] are foreign words that have no basis in the holy tongue, and many are words that they invented in their hearts and assembled from a mixture of languages. All this has arisen from the evil inclination, and although they do use the holy tongue [as a basis], they are grounded in the forces of impurity and the Other Side [Devil]. We see with our own eyes how their strength has grown with this language [...].¹⁸

Going on further than Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak Shneerson who claimed that Modern Hebrew has a foothold in the forces of impurity and the Other Side [Devil], Rabbi Teitelbaum asserts that Hebrew is, indeed, the language of the devil. He divides the existing languages of the world into three categories, and Modern Hebrew is isolated in the third, lowest category: "Indeed that impure language that was fabricated by the Zionists is not from the language of the Torah [which alone is holy], as the Zionists changed and falsified everything. And it is not one of the seventy languages [that still have a foothold in godliness] either. It is clear that its origin is the Other Side [Devil] and has no connection to holiness."¹⁹

Eventually, the victory of Modern Hebrew in the State of Israel was so unquestionable and overwhelming that even its most vehement critic, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, was forced to accept that it had taken root even among the local Hassidim and among the members of the Old Yishuv, who generally accepted his absolute halakhic authority and enjoyed his generous financial support. We see echoes of this post-facto grudging acceptance in a letter that his successor and nephew, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, wrote to Rabbi Simcha Elboim, the principal of a girls school in San Paulo, Brazil.

And I truly do not and will not understand what purpose or need is served by the girls studying Hebrew abroad. If in Israel they give excuses and say that it is necessary that they speak the language of the country, then this excuse is certainly not applicable abroad [...]. It only serves to pay homage to the Zionists and the language that they fabricated to enlarge the boundaries of apostasy from one edge of the world till the other.²⁰

Modern Hebrew ultimately penetrated the bastions of Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox community, and Hebrew is now the everyday language in which these Jews conduct discussions with neighbors and print their newspapers and billboards. Hebrew has even permeated the holy of holies of their existence

— the holy books. In 1990, a new edition of the Mishna Berura, the commentary of, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacoen from Radin (the Hafetz Chaim) on the Shulkhan Aruch-Orach Chaim, the essential holy book for the contemporary halakhic Jew was published. Attempting to improve the edition, the publisher, A. Bloom, re-translated some Yiddish terms into Hebrew. Rabbi Chaim Katzenelbogen, head of the dissident section of the Neturei Karta sect that does not accept the authority of the ultra-Orthodox community [“Eida Haredis”] noticed this attacked the “Zionistic Hebrew language” that mysteriously found its way into “our holy Temple.” Katzenelbogen writes the following in his column “The Impure Language” in the newspaper “The Wall”[HaHoma, under the pseudonym of Binyamin Levenstein:

It is the way of the evil inclination to introduce the impure Hebrew language indirectly, [even] through the study of the Mishna Berura. [...] For almost a hundred years since the Mishna Berura was printed, everyone understood the meaning of “houses for hands” and “houses for eyes” without the need to render “gloves” or “eyeglasses”. ... It is a very bad thing that we don’t constantly repeat and exhort about the evil impurity of the Zionists and their language. Since we [are not firm enough on this matter] the evil spirit finds it way to us without our being aware of it. Thus it is our obligation to repeat and to teach our sons the depth of the impurity of this language, and with G-d’s help we will be saved from the Zionists and their language.²¹

The prominent rabbi who gave the halakhic permission to use Modern Hebrew and to ignore the forbidders was Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, known as the “Chazon Ish.” He was a renowned rabbinical religious authority, the highest authority of the last generation and the unofficial leader of the Old Yishuv ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian coterie that lived near him in the Torah city of Bnei Brak. A Jerusalem faction approached the Chazon Ish and asked him to publicize a ban on studying Hebrew in Talmud Torah schools in their reliance on the old prohibitions of the rabbis. The Chazon Ish rejected their appeal with the following story and parable:

Once there was an elderly commander who had led many battles in his youth within certain military sectors which had been the front and the scene of fierce battles, and there he achieved great victories. Then, many years passed and again war broke out and the same elderly commander claimed that it was necessary to coordinate the combat forces in the “historical” battlefield, which in his time had been the battle front, despite the fact that now there were newer, much more dangerous weak points. And the moral of the story is—this [the Hebrew language] is no longer our primary battlefield these days.²²

The Chazon Ish took a pragmatic approach in his relatively tolerant attitude towards Hebrew with arguments for leniency. However, after he died, certain personalities within his camp took advantage of the lack of his authoritative presence to launch local battles contradicting his position. His nephew, Rabbi Chaim Shaul Kerelitz, published a scathing attack on Modern Hebrew with the heading “Life and Death in the Hands of the Tongue.” He claimed that the Zionists purposely manipulated the Hebrew language to blur the border between the holy and the profane, the pure and impure. In order to

illustrate this, he selected Hebrew words with connotations that were “enslaved” by the renewers of the language in order to serve their interests, for example, the appellation “court of law”:

We are careful not to call the tribunals where they render legal judgment a “court of law” as they call themselves, since their legal system is based on laws of the idol worshippers and their very essence is to uproot all laws and judgments of the holy Torah. We are careful with these semantics and constantly repeat that they are not to be called “courts of law” but only tribunals, so as to discourage all Jews who believe in G-d’s Torah to refrain from turning to them. And even so, due to our many sins, it still happens that G-d fearing Jews do turn to them.²³

The name for Israel’s Defense Ministry [bitachon] as well as the use of Knesset for Israel’s parliament meet with similar objections.²⁴

Rabbi Y. Avraham Wolfe, director of the Beis Yaakov Seminary for Girls in B’nai Brak, struggles (like his predecessor) with “truly invalid [Hebrew] words that we must abstain from using.” His repository of disqualified terms includes, for example, the word “aggadah” which refers to homiletic passages in Rabbinic literature, but has come to mean “fable” or “fairy tale” in Modern Hebrew. In Rabbi Wolfe’s opinion, this desecrated the holiness of the word “aggadah” and “turned it into a kind of children’s fairy-tale like Red Riding Hood.” “The Greeks have fables or fairy tales, but they have no framework of aggadah. An aggadah is part of the Torah, and one who has no Torah also has no O.”

Rabbi Wolfe rails against the word “moreh” or teacher in the way it is used today, and also forbids the use of “minister” or sar for someone who heads a government ministry, because this appellation [sar] was applied in the Torah to Avner when King David lamented his death by saying, “A prince [sar] and a great man has fallen this day.” Similarly, he deems the “Ministry of Religion” to be a mixture of Torah-truth and a belief in vanity or futility. He even scorns the haughtiness he feels is implicit in the appellation of the “Six Day War” saying, “It is reminiscent of ‘My power and the might of my hand’—in only six days we won. Let us say that you allude to the salvation of God for such a short war [...]? Then you would have to change the name to ‘Six Day Salvation.’”²⁵

Heralding the trend of closely examining Hebrew words, then searching for the malicious intent encoded in them, Uriel Zimmer, a multi-faceted and talented man, published a booklet called “Torah Judaism and the State” under the pseudonym A. Gittlin. In this work he adopted the linguistic approach of Bergstrasser: that the attempt to revive Hebrew without “a keen sensitivity to the Hebrew language” will, of necessity, bring about a “sham or simulated solution.” In his view Modern Hebrew is nothing more than a European language transparently covered by the holy tongue. Zimmer had difficulty demonstrating this point however, so he satisfied himself with bringing real examples from instances of Modern Hebrew that, while seeming fairly innocent, actually record the process of turning the biblical language into the Zionist language of a modern nation.

Take, for example, the word for electricity [chashmal]. Zimmer writes:

This word originally appears in the Book of Ezekiel (1:4) in the chapter describing the Divine vision of the prophet. This chapter, which is usually referred to as Maase Merkovo [“Vision of the Heavenly Chariot”] is one of the most hallowed and most mysterious of Biblical passages. In that vision, the prophet saw a great fire, “and out of the midst thereof as the color of chashmal.” What chashmal really means is, to say the least, a subject for scholarly research ... It is, of course, not our purpose here to go into exegetic deliberations or etymological research. Practically, however, the fact remains that, throughout Jewish history, the very mention of chashmal aroused a feeling of awe in the mind of every Torah-true Jew, child or adult, seeing that chashmal is automatically associated with the most Divine, the most sublime. However, in our time, the modern Hebrew-speaking child or adult knows only that chashmal means electricity, something which he uses and encounters a hundred times a day, something devoid of any sanctity and associated only with his living-room, television, radio or bathroom.

“Thus when this boy meets up again with the word in Ezekiel, his subconscious transforms the revelation to something ridiculous, even grotesque. The “Vision of the Heavenly Chariot,” seems to him like an electrical game of illumination; at best, a secular or profane approach. This is exactly the intention of those who claimed to “revive the language.”²⁶

After a quiescent period the Ashkenazi Orthodox polemics returned during the “Year of the Hebrew Language” (5750/1989). Ultra-Orthodox newspapers published several articles that recycled the old arguments. The boldest of them all was the ultra-Orthodox publicist A. Yisrael (now Yisrael Eichler a member of the Knesset for Yahadut Hatorah) who wrote for “Machane Haredi,” the journal of the Belz Hassidim. He ends his attack with a call for a Yiddish revival:

All this represents good reasons for those who love the holy tongue and despise Modern Hebrew, to return to speaking in Yiddish. We must educate our children in Yiddish and inculcate the holy tongue in them through Torah and prayers. [...] The holy tongue is our mama loshen, our real mother tongue. Modern Hebrew is not our language, but a foreign language that was a tool in the campaign to apostatize our brothers and consume their souls. We must thank the Master of the Universe, that we were fortunate to be saved from [the designs of] its creators.²⁷

In his examination of the changes in Hebrew grammar over the last generation, the linguistics researcher Prof. Gad Ben-Ami Zarfati contends that the transition from the passive to the active tense reflects a change in worldview. “I would summarize this phenomenon as a transition from theocentrism to anthropocentrism [...] as a transition from the holy tongue to a secular, national language.”²⁸

Following Zarfati, we can describe the change as a transition from a holy tongue to a secular language. This is precisely what is perceived in the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox consciousness as the transition from the language of G-d to the language of the Sitra Acha [Devil].

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- ¹ Joseph Lang, "Foundation and Development of the Safa Brura," *Cathedra* 68, June 1993, p. 67.
- ² Menachem Friedman, *A Society in Crisis of Legitimacy — The Ashkenazi Old Yishuv, 1900-1917*, (Jerusalem, 2001)
- ³ Gershon C. Bacon, "Daas Torah V'Chevlei Moshiach" [Torah opinion and birth pangs of the Messiah], *Tarbiz* 52:3, March 1983, pp. 497-508.
- ⁴ Rivka Schatz, "Reishit HaMasa Neged HaRav Kook" [The beginning of the campaign against Rabbi Kook], *Molad*, new series, 6 (30), pamphlet 32 (242), December 1974, p. 256.
- ⁵ According to Yadler, "They have blazed both right and left to renounce our entire Torah and to extend false signs of purity in their hoofs. They have exchanged the entire Torah for the study of the Hebrew language and the history of the Jewish people ("history")." Ben Zion Yadler, *For the Good of Jerusalem — Memories of the Jerusalem Maggid*, (Bnei Brak: 1967), p. 75.
- ⁶ In the Jerusalem Talmud see Brachot Chapter 1, Halakha 8. In the Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 12a. The issue is actually much more complex than my brief summary here. For a detailed discussion see Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Ten Commandments in Ritual and Prayer," in: *The Ten Commandments Through the Generations*, ed. Ben-Zion Segal, (Jerusalem: 1987), pp. 127-145.
- ⁷ "Um Ani Homah" [The nation as a wall], (Jerusalem: March 1953), p. 27, in: *Sefer Mishkenot HaRoim [Book of Habitat of the Shepherd]*, collected by Aharon Rosenberg, (New York: 1984) Vol 1, p. 226. See Note 1: Lang relies on a comment in the handwriting of the undersigned Michelin, Rabbi Salant's personal assistant in the years 1882-1892, written in a copy of M. Lipson's book, *MiDor Dor [From generation to generation]*, Vol 1, (Tel Aviv and New York: 1929), that this story is attributed by mistake to Joseph Rivlin and instead, these are the words of Salant, as written in the journal of Neturei Karta, "Um Ani Homah" [The nation as a wall].
- ⁸ Moshe Blau, *Al homotayickh Yerushalayim: Pirkei Hayay [On your walls, Jerusalem: Chapters of my life]*, (Tel Aviv: 1945), p. 115.
- ⁹ Yadler, *For the Good of Jerusalem*, page 77.
- ¹⁰ Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rebbe Shalom Dov Ber Shneerson, "Lashon ha-Kodesh v'hadibur bah" [The Holy tongue and its use in daily speech], in: *Sefer Migdal Oz, [Book of the tower of strength]*, ed. Yehoshua Mondeshein, (Kfar Habad: 1980), pp. 16-22.
- ¹¹ Rebbe Shalom Dov Ber's historical conclusions are not consistent with modern scholarship and research regarding the use of Hebrew. For example, Jews spoke Hebrew during the Persian era of the Second Temple period (see Nechemia 13: 24); and many Rishonim did write in Hebrew.
- ¹² Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Shneerson, *Likutei Diburim [Collection of speeches]*, (trans. by Avraham Chanoch Glitzenstein) Vol 3, (New York: 1956), pp. 419-420..
- ¹³ Ephraim Deinard, *Floydazark oh m'orat tsifonim [Floydazark or den of snakes]*, (Newark: 1889), pp. 85-86.
- ¹⁴ "Taharat Lishoneinu HaKedosh" [Holiness of our pure language], *HaHavazelet* 27: (43), August 1897.
- ¹⁵ "Lashon Remiya" [Tongue of lies], *HaHavazelet* 27 (28), April 1897
- ¹⁶ "And this language they speak, "they shall put on the hairy mantle to deceive" (Zechariah 13: 4). It is no longer the holy tongue ... only immorality and a mélange of the most ruined daughters of Zion. Even the language itself, they made new rules of grammar and new verbs and new words, until it is no longer the holy tongue but "Hebrew/Hebrish." See Rabbi Chaim Elazar Shapiro, *Haim V'Shalom—Beurim al haTorah b'darhei ha'hasidim, [Life and Peace—Commentary on the torah in the path of the Hasidim]*, Vol 1, (Sziget: 1938).
- ¹⁷ Rabbi Ben-Zion Halberstam, "Kedushat Zion: al haTorah" [Holiness of Zion: On the Torah], in *Sefer Mishkenot HaRoim [Book of Habitat of the Shepherd]*, collected by Aharon Rosenberg, (New York: 1983) Vol 2, p. 643.
- ¹⁸ *Sefer mi'torato shel rabeinu, [Book of the Torah of our rabbi]*, collected and edited by Rabbi Shlomo Eliezer Margoliyot, (New York: 1983), Part 3, p. 357-358, by Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, *Divrei Yoel [Words of Yoel]*, 9:34..
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 356, by Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, *Divrei Yoel [Words of Yoel]*, 9:17.
- ²⁰ "Holy letter from our illustrious rabbi, regarding the prohibition of the Hebrew language that the heretics have fabricated." October 1993. It was included in a proclamation that was distributed in 1993 in honor of Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum's arrival in Israel. From personal archives.
- ²¹ *HaHoma [The Wall]*, Volume 35, tractate 8, June 1990, p. 11 *HaHoma [The Wall]*, Volume 35, tractate 8, June 1990, p. 11.

²²Pe'er hador—hayei HaHazon Ish [Splendor of our generation: The life of the Chazon Ish], edited by the Organization of Haredi Writers, headed by Rabbi Shlomo Cohen, (Bnei Brak: 1969), Part 2, p. 172. Also see: Hashkafateinu-B'aspakloria shel dorot [Our outlook through the generations], (Bnei Brak: 1977), Part 1, Chapter: Hinuch [Education]. Rabbi Moshe Shenfeld contributed the story.

²³“LaChoshvei Shmo” [Thinkers of his name], August 1972, in: Hashkafateinu L'Ba'ayot Ha'sha'ah [Our outlook on current problems], (Bnei Brak: 1979), Part 3, p. 58.

²⁴“And the worst example of all that has truly distressed us, is their appellation of “Knesset” for the institution of heresy, godlessness, and the reviling of G-d's name. This institution dares to uproot the Torah of Moses and the laws and judgments of our holy Torah, and instead, plant laws of falsehood and nonsense.” See “LaChoshvei Shmo.”

²⁵“Lashon hakodesh v'ivrit [The Holy Tongue and Hebrew] (5731), In: Hashkafateinu—l'ba'ayot hash'a'ah [Our viewpoint of current problems], (Bnei Brak, 1981) [5741], Part D, p. 119. Brought in detail in his book: HaTekufa u'ba'ayoteha-chelek chinuch [The era and its problems—education section], Bnei Brak, 1981 [5741], p. 204-207.

²⁶A. Gittlin, “Yahadus hatorah v'hamedina” [Yahadus Hatorah and the State], Jerusalem, [no publication date].

²⁷A. Yisrael, “Asher shinanu kacherev lashonam,” [They memorized their language like a sword], HaMachane HaCharedi, Issue 452, October 1989 p. 3.

²⁸Gad B. Zarfati, “Trends and Approaches in Semantics of Modern Hebrew,” Lishoneinu, Vol. 54, Issues 2, 3 and 4, (Jerusalem, 1990), p. 119.2