

The sanctity of the Hebrew language: Divine and/or cultural

Rav Shalom Ber Schneerson (the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe), in a letter of 1916:¹

Therefore, the Holy Language is sanctified for Torah and sacred words, and one may not use it for profane words.

And in light of all this, is it possible to hand over this language, so that the masses of the people – men, women, and children – should use it to talk about their needs, and especially since most things that people say are nonsense...and especially in our generation, these masses, and the youth, what do they talk about? It's embarrassing to even mention what people talk about in the world.

Now, the world imagines that in ancient times, in the days of the Sages of the Talmud, everyone spoke the Holy Language, but this is a mistake, only in the times of the First Temple did they speak in the Holy Language, as it seems from 2 Kings 18:26, because then all the nation of the Lord were holy, but in the times of the Second Temple, the masses did not speak the Holy Language.

And this is the reason and the logic of the great rabbis, those who tremble at the word of God, who oppose learning 'ivrit be-'ivrit'. ... But those who concocted the idea to make the Holy Language a spoken language, and those who support this idea, remove it from the sacred to the profane, and therefore they changed its name and call it 'the language of Ever', in order to remove it from its sanctity. But Israel was called Ever only before the giving of the Torah.

But the creators of the Zionist idea, who follow a different idea altogether, and replaced the entire Torah with the idea of the nation ... And therefore they hold fast to the taking of the Holy Land, and not because of the sanctity or purity of the place, but for the nationalism, which is tied to the earthly land, for there is no nationalism without a state... and therefore they hold fast to the language, for there is no respectable nation without a language.

And therefore, those who fear and tremble at the word of God, see in this a desecration of the sacred in a terrifying way, and think that this is an absolutely forbidden matter, as was explained.

ועל כן לשון הקדש הוא מוקדש לתורה ולדברים שבקדושה, ואין להשתמש בו דברי חול.

ואחר כ"ז האם אפשר למסור הלשון הזה, שידברו בו המון עם אנשים ונשים וטף, אפי' לדבר בו בצרכיהם ומל"ש שרוב דבור בנ"א הוא בדברים בטלים...ובפרט בדורותינו אלה המון עם והנערים מה המה מדברים, הלא רק לבשת הוא להזכיר מה שמדברים עתה בעולם.

והנה העולם מדמים שבימים הקדמונים בימי חכמי התלמוד היו הכל מדברים בלה"ק, וטעות הוא, רק בזמן בית ראשון היו מדברים בלה"ק כדמשמע בלמכים ב' סי' י"ח כ"ו, כי אז היו כל עם ה' קדושים, אבל בזמן בית שני המון עם לא היו מדברים בלה"ק.

וזו טעם ודעת גדולי הרבנים והחרדים על דבר ה', שמנגדים אל התלמוד עברית בעברית ... אבל אותן שהמציאו לעשות לה"ק לשפה המדוברת והמחזיקים בשיטה זו, מוציאים אותן מן הקדש את החול, וע"כ שינו את שמו וקורין אותו שפת עבר, למען הוציאו מקדושתו. בשם עברי נקראים ישראל קודם מתן תורה.

אך מחוללי הרעיון הציוני, שלקחו להם שיטה אחרת לגמרי, והחליפו כל התורה ברעיון הלאומי...ומשו"ז החזיקו בתוקף בלקיחת הארץ הקדושה, ולא לשם קדושת וטהרת המקום, כ"א בשביל הלאומיות שהיא קשורה בכברת הארץ, כי אין לאומיות בלא מדינה...ומשו"ז החזיקו ג"כ בהלשון כי אין אומה נכבדת בלא לשון.

ועל כן היראים וחרדים לדבר ה', רואים בזה חילול הקדש באופן מבהיל, וחושבים זאת לדבר איסור גמור כאשר נתבאר.

¹ Printed in ע"ה 1980, 16-22. (ed. Joshua Mondschein; Kefar Habad: Makhon Lubavitch, 1980), 16-22.

Franz Rosenzweig, "Classical and Modern Hebrew" (A Review of a Translation into the Hebrew of Spinoza's *Ethics*, by Jacob Klatzkin):²

The holiness of the Hebrew language never signified holiness in the original sense of 'seclusion,' a meaning that has been overcome in classical Judaism. The holy language, the language of God, has always drawn strength for renewal from the spoken language...; it always stayed alive. The Hebrew of the Torah and of the Book of Esther, the majesty of the great central prayers, the exquisite proportions of the Mishnah, the baroque of Kalir, the classicism of the great Spanish authors, the pious sobriety of Maimonides, Rashi's serene yet impassioned instruction, the absence of linguistic scruples of the Tibbonides, the crudeness of the Shulhan Arukh, the historicism of the Haskalah in the historical nineteenth century—all this is Hebrew.

To read Hebrew implies a readiness to assume the total heritage of the language. Reading German, English, or Latin, one merely harvests the crop raised by a single generation on the acre of language. The holy language demands to be understood, word for word. Moreover, the languages spoken by the Jewish people in their everyday life...swarm with quotations. Quotation marks would be their most frequently used form of punctuation.

Maimonides on the conventionality of Hebrew

Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot 1:7

Know that songs composed in any language are judged according to their contents.... I have seen great and pious men of our nation, if they are invited to a party or a wedding or something of the sort, and someone there wants to sing in Arabic – even if the contents of that song were praise of bravery, which is praiseworthy speech, or praise of wine – protest vehemently and do not allow it to be heard. But if the singer sings any Hebrew song, they do not protest at all and this seems to not bother them at all, even if the contents are objectionable or even forbidden. This is utter stupidity, because speech is not permitted or forbidden or encouraged or discouraged or required because of the language it's in, but because of its contents.

Maimonides, letter to Mr. Yusuf ibn Jābbar:³

The first thing for you to know (may God fortify your strength and add to your success), is that you are not an *'am ha-'aretz*, but rather our disciple and beloved – as are all who labor in the quest for learning [Torah] and understood even one verse, or one law. And it makes no difference if it was understood through Hebrew, or Aramaic, or Arabic; the point is to understand the meaning, in whatever language. The *Shema'* may be recited in any language – certainly the commentaries (*šarh~*) and the compositions (*tuwālif*)! The main thing is to be involved in learning.

² Translated in Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, 266-268.

³ From *The Letters of Maimonides* (ed. Shailat), 1404.

Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*:

It might be suggested that our want of a common current language would present difficulties. We cannot converse with one another in Hebrew. Who amongst us has a sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway ticket in that language? Such a thing cannot be done. Yet the difficulty is very easily circumvented. Every man can preserve the language in which his thoughts are at home. Switzerland affords a conclusive proof of the possibility of a federation of tongues [Sprachenföderalismus]. We shall remain in the new country what we now are here, and we shall never cease to cherish the memory of the native land out of which we have been driven.

We shall give up using those miserable, stunted jargons, those Ghetto languages which we still employ, for ours was the stealthy speech of prisoners. Our national teachers will give due attention to this matter; and the language which proves itself to be of greatest utility for general intercourse will be adopted without compulsion as our national tongue [Hauptsprache]. Our communal tie is peculiar and unique, for we are bound together only by the faith of our fathers.

Aḥad ha-'Am, Review of Herzl's novel *Altneuland*.⁴

In general, we find no clear answer in the entire book on the "language question," and we can't really say what language dominates life in *Altneuland*. From a number of hints, however, dropped along the way, we can learn that the masses in the villages as well as the cities speak the Yiddish they brought with them from the Diaspora, and the intellectuals speak the languages of Europe, especially German, which is the language of the leaders.

There are also a good number of theaters in Haifa. There is a German theater, a French theater, an English theater, an Italian theater, and even a Spanish theater! On top of all these, there is also a "national" theater the only "national" institution that the author tells us about in this city – in which there are plays about Jewish history, apparently in the European languages. Additionally, there is a theater for the masses, where there is Yiddish comedy, not in good taste. And if you prefer music to drama, you can go to the opera house and hear Jewish compositions, which have proliferated in recent years. But be sure to have white gloves, so that what happened to the protagonists doesn't happen to you – they have to stop on their way to the opera to buy some white gloves. Without white gloves, you know, it is improper to enter the opera in Haifa, just like in Paris!

In Haifa, as in the rest of the cities of Israel, there are great periodicals. ... Do these have any Jewish content at all? Do they have room for the questions that occupy Jews *as Jews*? How do these periodicals deal with these questions? None of this is known to us, just as we do not know what language these journals are in, and whether there may be at least one that is in Hebrew. ...

The people of the village greet the guests, "*Hedad!*" This is the first time, since we have arrived in *Altneuland*, that a Hebrew word reaches our ears..., but this first word is also the last word we hear from the villagers. ... All the conversations and speeches of the leaders which we hear are in Yiddish or pure German. ... Apparently Hebrew is used in *Altneuland*, as in the Diaspora, only for prayers and blessings.

⁴ Originally published in Hebrew in *Ha-Shiloah* 10.6 (1903), then in German translation in *Ost und West* 3.4 (1903). Translation from כל כחבי אחד העם, 317-318.

