

Introduction

This book tells two stories: first, how Hebrew has been used in Jewish life, from the Israelites to the ancient Rabbis and across two thousand years of nurture, abandonment, and renewal, eventually given up by many for dead but improbably rescued to become the everyday language of modern Israel. Second, it tells the story of how Jews—and Christians—have conceived of Hebrew, and invested it with a symbolic power far beyond normal language.

As befits any stirring and suspenseful tale, we will follow it as it unfolded. But this book is more than an exciting story and certainly more than an exercise in historical linguistics. It will examine the history of Hebrew using ethnographic, sociolinguistic, and philosophical approaches. What purpose did Hebrew serve? How has it figured in the popular and learned imagination? How did Hebrew figure into Jews' sense of identity, and how did that relationship change with the advent of Zionism? What kept Hebrew from dying out completely, and what made its near-impossible revival possible? And what can its remarkable story teach about the workings of human language in general?

In short, this is not so much a book about what Hebrew words mean as about what the Hebrew language has meant to the people who have possessed it. To explore this topic, we will examine what they wrote about Hebrew and the various ways in which they used it. We will also look beyond the words and grammatical structures

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to communication styles and to the “para-language” of scripts, fonts, spellings, formats. In many cultures, people see script and spelling as inseparable from the language; in others, writing is in itself sacred. No account of language can ignore the pull of para-language.

Jews have done a great deal of thinking about Hebrew—more, perhaps, than most peoples have thought about their language—and for a good reason. For much of their history, Hebrew was not a mother tongue to be spoken naturally. Rather, Jews kept it alive by raising their young men to study and ponder Hebrew texts. This was true for a period of some two thousand years, stretching from the close of the biblical era down to the early twentieth century and the restoration of spoken Hebrew.

But how did Hebrew mean so much to them and how could Jews keep it alive so well that, after two millennia, it could be restored almost overnight? The restoration of Hebrew, first as a mother tongue and then as an all-purpose language of a modern Jewish state, was an act without precedent in linguistic and sociopolitical history. I seek to explain this revival in those terms, but also by exploring the ideas, emotions, and sensibilities that made it possible.

The engine of Jewish existence for those two millennia was the study of the Torah, Judaism’s sacred texts: Bible, Midrash, Talmud, and the teachings springing from them. In the words of Psalm 119:97, “How dearly I love Thy Torah; I speak about it all day long.” Jews intensively studied the wording of these texts for every conceivable nuance. The loss of their Temple, their liberty, and then their homeland in the first centuries of the Common Era imperiled but ultimately strengthened knowledge of the Torah and the Hebrew language as a core component of Jewish identity.

Jews, of course, were not the only people who believed the Hebrew Bible to be sacred. Not surprisingly, at various times, signifi-

cant numbers of Christians became interested in the language of their Old Testament. As we shall see in chapters 6 and 7, the High Middle Ages brought a succession of intellectual upheavals and religious crises to Catholic Europe that formed a potent brew of curiosity, envy, and dark suspicion of the Jews' command of Hebrew and of the biblical text.

Two religious goals dominated Christian thinking about the Hebrew language: spiritual renewal and the conversion of the Jews. With the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation, this interest became intense, and intense conflict also ensued. The focus varied wildly: Kabbalah-mania, Talmud-phobia, vernacular Bible study, millennialism, rabbinic political thought, Puritan dreams of a New Israel. Religion aside, many minds in the Christian Renaissance also found philosophical and political significance in the Hebrew language and its literature.

By early modern times, Christian enthusiasm for Hebrew had achieved its goals or changed tack. For Jews, however, the Hebrew narrative went on and soon took extraordinary turns: not as the language of religion but as the language of national identity.

Almost throughout their history, Jews have taken for granted that they are a people as well as a religion. This national consciousness, rooted in biblical memory, held firm across the centuries of Diaspora and provided a cogent and inspirational rationale for modern Zionism. The Hebrew language and its literature have been critical elements in this national identity, often as a counterforce to rival cultures and languages—Greek in the ancient world, Arabic in the Middle Ages, European vernaculars in the modern era, and now global English. Pride in the force and grace of the language underpinned the secular Hebrew literature of the medieval Diaspora and the modern revival as much as religious commitment has underpinned Hebrew's sacred literature.

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Even in secular Israeli and Western circles, where Jewishness is proclaimed to be a matter of culture rather than religion, the Jewish ethnic heritage is loudly celebrated. But Hebrew had to defeat fierce competition from within in order to become the language of secular Jewish culture. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a variety of modern political and social movements seized on Yiddish as a preferred national Jewish language, sometimes with catastrophic intent for Hebrew and its users. But Hebrew has emerged victorious, while Yiddish, though not dead, has receded to the margins.

Modern secular culture—and above all literature—prizes creativity, which is the third rail supplying the current of Jewish Hebraism. Whether religious or national in spirit, or both, creativity has driven the Hebrew language and its literature to ever-new vistas and forms. It has had both classical and romantic inclinations: esteem for clarity and adherence to strict biblical models, and a penchant for enigma and innovation. There have been ferocious battles and cruel aspersions. But never, it seems, have Hebrew artists been content merely to pick over the ancient scriptures. Medieval liturgical poems, the worldly poetry of the medieval Spanish and Italian “golden age,” ḥasidic tales, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century Israeli fiction are just four products of this creative force.

Scientific and technical writing could also be creative. With little access to Latin or Greek, the Jews of medieval Christian Europe who could read Arabic scientific texts tailored a variety of Hebrew styles and terminologies to produce their own technical-scientific literature for training generations of Jewish doctors and academics—an endeavor that also boosted these scholars’ sense of pride in their faith and their language.

Even in the centuries between ancient and modern “normality,” there was (and still is) much about the Hebrew of the Diaspora that

characterizes a living language rather than a dead one. And then there is the mundane. Nowhere, perhaps, has Diaspora Hebrew felt so much part and parcel of Jewish life as in the centuries of business jottings or personal letters often couched in the holy tongue, sometimes intermingled with the vernacular.

Diaspora Hebrew has also tenaciously survived the enormous changes brought by modernity. Even among the non-Orthodox, it is common for children to learn to chant at the very least a few verses in Hebrew for their bar or bat mitzvah, even if these children will probably never know enough Hebrew to understand a text or order a soda. Yet Diaspora Jewish parents continue to have their children invest months in this “ordeal by language.” And the vast majority of Diaspora synagogues incorporate at least some Hebrew into the prayer service. Especially in our generally monolingual society, this is a tribute to the strength of commitment to the Hebrew language.

For Diaspora Jews, then, perhaps as much as for Israeli Jews, Hebrew is a key element of Jewish identity. Social and personal identity are intricate concepts and much debated, and Jewish identity has always had its own particular tangles. How did preexilic biblical Hebrews define themselves? And what of modern secular Jews, whose sense of Jewish identity is often strong, even if it is divested of what was long the core of Jewishness. Perhaps the biggest twist in Jewish identity was the early Zionist formulation of a novel Hebrew identity to replace a Jewish one. This formulation now itself seems antiquated, but it has left in its wake a new notion of Israeli-ness, spanning a gamut of identities (many of them new, not all of them Jewish) for millions of Israeli Jews.

Should Hebrew, then, be considered a Jewish language? This question has obsessed some modern ideologues. For entirely differ-

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ent reasons, it unsettled Christian Hebraists from Jerome down to the Renaissance. Ultimately, it is a matter of definition, but, as we will see, the broad facts are clear: from late antiquity to the nineteenth century, Jewish sacred texts were allusively present in much of the Hebrew being read or written. Israeli Hebrew, however, has since evolved a spoken and written style that, though rooted linguistically in the sacred texts, has become independent of them.

And what of Hebrew's theological implications? "The holy tongue" was long a synonym for Hebrew, and not just among Jews. Why, in what sense, and for whom was it holy? A widespread misconception (telling in itself) has it that ultra-Orthodox Jews refuse to speak Hebrew because it is sacred. Even more prevalent is the misconception that Hebrew in the Diaspora was used *exclusively* for prayer and study. It is true that ultra-Orthodox Jews believe Hebrew to be holy, as did pre-Zionist diasporic Jews. But there was and is little consensus about what this sanctity entails. The greatest of medieval Jewish thinkers were deeply divided on the question. Hebrew (or perhaps the biblical text) has been hailed as divine language, esoteric tool, demonic weapon, and the acme of linguistic purity.

As for modern Hebrew, its origins lie not with Zionism but with the Jewish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. And its adoption by Zionism was by no means predetermined. Indeed, the so-called language wars threatened to tear the early Zionist movement apart.

Continuity over the millennia and rebirth from the dead have become bewitching (if seemingly incompatible) tropes for Hebrew. In every age, a conservative Hebrew spirit has wrestled with one of innovation and experimentation, and in present-day Israel it still does. But continuity does not imply sameness. Throughout this

book, we will keep seeing the same pieces on the board, but they will be moving around ad infinitum.

If there is a language that has been and continues to be identified as Hebrew, it is not just for linguistic reasons. Powerful ideas are at work. Underpinning them is the Jewish belief that Hebrew is a key to their traditions and a warranty for the Jewish future.