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My Love Affair with Hebrew

ISRAEL SCHEFFLER

“To my Hebrew Readers: I fell in love with Hebrew almost from the day I was born.” Thus begins Israel Scheffler’s introduction to an anthology of many of his major articles about varied issues in and aspects of education, alongside with some of his memoirs. As English readers, it may come as a surprise to know that until now, these essays (upon which we “grew up”) have not been available to a Hebrew speaking audience. And we might assume that his introductory essay might be an opportunity for him to illuminate some of his key ideas. Instead he begins with a paean to his love of Hebrew.

He explained his motivation to a group of educators at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University in this way: “I did not want to tell others how to read and what sense to make of my words. So I wrote this instead.” From this explanation, one learns both of the high esteem Scheffler holds for others and of his own modesty. From the essay itself, one learns about the variety and depth of Scheffler’s Jewish learning and experiences, about issues related to translation of research, about the ways in which teachers themselves are the subject of learning, and about Scheffler’s love and passion for learning. As he said in the very same address at Brandeis: “We’re always learning. Even while you’re sleeping, you’re learning.”

We at the Journal are delighted to be able to share this essay with you. Would that his love affair with Hebrew in particular and learning in general could be contagious!

Gail Z. Dorph, Associate Editor

This essay is a translation of Israel Scheffler’s introduction to an anthology of his own writings. Previously unavailable to a Hebrew

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This essay is an excerpt from the anthology, “Machshavot Al Chinuch” (Thoughts About Education), part of the series, Marei Makom (References), published by the Mandel Foundation and Keter Books, winter, 2010.
speaking audience, this anthology contains many of his major articles about Jewish education, alongside some of his memoirs. And yet, he chooses to begin this anthology with a paean to his love of Hebrew. From the essay itself, one learns about the variety and depth of Scheffler’s Jewish learning and experiences, about issues related to translation of research, about the ways in which teachers themselves are the subject of learning, and about Scheffler’s love and passion for learning.

To My Hebrew Readers:
I fell in love with Hebrew almost from the day I was born. It is not that Hebrew was my native tongue. Far from it! Yiddish was the language I acquired first, the language of my family and the language of obvious practical importance in communication with my parents, siblings and childhood friends in expressing my wishes, intentions and emotions. Hebrew had a different role to play in my earliest experience.

My parents, deeply religious and observant, emigrated from Romania to New York fourteen years before I was born, settled in a profoundly Jewish neighborhood in which the common language was Yiddish which was used in daily life, in the home, in the street and in business. Hebrew, however, reigned in the synagogue, the shul, the shtiebel and the beis medrash as well as the Talmud Torah and yeshiva, but, most importantly, it permeated the inner life of the family in the ceremonial and devotional ties it fostered between home, synagogue and religious lore.

Well before I could read let alone understand the meaning of Hebrew words and sentences embedded in the traditional blessings and prayers of our home, I could recognize, even recite, a good many of them, absorbing as well the melodies and rhythms in which they were framed. Further, I could sense that they were part of a deeply solemn and supremely important secret of unimaginable value to my parents and to others of our people who could decode it by unlocking the language in which it was couched.

Nor was the enviable ability to unlock the language restricted to adults who had, no doubt to devote untold years of strenuous study to acquire it, an accomplishment impossibly distant from my current status as a child. For, coming early to a minha service one afternoon, I was fascinated to notice, on a back row of the shul, a young boy only a year or so older than I, listening intently to a teenage youngster engaged in translating word for word, a paragraph from the siddur into English, elaborating its meaning as he went! So, acquiring the language that encoded the mysterious world secret of our people was not, after all, an impossibly distant goal to dream of, even for a child. I could, realistically, hope to acquire a knowledge of Hebrew incrementally well before reaching adulthood.
The problem was finding schools in which such knowledge could be nurtured—schools in our neighborhood within walking distance. My educational hope was more than shared by my parents and grandparents, the latter sending letters to the former from Romania, lamenting my meager attainments in the traditional learning, and forecasting a dim future for me unless serious Jewish schooling could be secured for me. My father scoured our neighborhood and fortunately located a small Talmud Torah attached to a shul considerably farther to reach by walking than what we had been used to. But the teacher was a real find, a learned scholar with modernist leanings who had emigrated from Russia but, most important, a teacher who taught all his classes with spoken Hebrew as the language of instruction! I was immediately enrolled in his school. Since his classes were all already engaged in learning through the fluent use of Hebrew, I was not able to join them. I have, in my book “Teachers of my Youth,” described Mr. Zusevitz’ ingenious method for teaching me in such a way as to enable me to join the most suitable regular class before the end of the term. The result, achieved well before my Bar Mitzvah, was a revelation.

The next stage carried me still further: it involved my becoming a student in the oldest yeshivah k’tanah in America, the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School in the East Side of New York City. Here the level of spoken Hebrew was much higher than in Mr. Zusevitz’ classes. Entering the class for the first time, I was ashamed to find myself dumbstruck by the speed and facility with which even the youngest in the class expressed themselves in idiomatic Hebrew. The challenging and varied curriculum, moreover, included a chapter in a Talmudic tractate, the Book of Jeremiah, modern Hebrew essays, a Jewish history textbook that dealt with the Hellenistic period, and a serious text of Hebrew grammar. All these subjects were taught by a single teacher, Mr. Eliezer Leideker, author of a multi-volume set of books on the social ethics of the Torah, Sheurim Be-Torah, and a book on the Jewish calendar, Ha-Luach Ha-Ivri, as well as a lawyer who had not long before I joined his class passed the New York Bar. The fact that he taught all the above subjects reinforced for us the understanding that, radically different as they were, they were all encompassed by the Hebrew language, which embraced different historical periods and different styles—the legal, the scientific, the ethical, the poetic, the religious and the grammatical. The common language could, in fact, provide access to untold mysteries!

After my Bar Mitzvah and completion of the sole year of junior high offered at the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, I had to relocate again; this time my parents enrolled me in the Teachers’ Institute of the Yeshivath Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchanan where I remained through my high school years, commuting by train an hour and a half each way, the school day comprising both Jewish and general studies. The Yeshiva had two divisions, the one where the Jewish studies comprised an essentially Talmudic curriculum offering Rabbinic training leading to s’mikhah, with classes taught in Yiddish, the
other providing a six-year curriculum where the Jewish studies were taught in Hebrew, leading to certification as a Hebrew teacher. My parents and I chose the latter as being broader, more modern, more varied, and more closely tied to Zionism and the Yishuv in Palestine. Here specialization was the rule, each subject being taught by a single teacher treated as an authority on that subject. My initial class on Hebrew literature, my first year, was taught by Abraham Soyer, noted for his stories for children among other works. The history teacher was Dr. Pinchas Churgin, who had written much about the Second Temple period of Jewish history. My Bible teacher was Dr. Klotz with whom we studied the Minor Prophets, referring to modern and contemporary researchers as well as traditional exegetes. Increased reference to contemporary research enriched my appreciation for the depth of the learning to which my fascination with Hebrew could take me. We had, in addition, classes in Talmud and in Codes, dealing with Jewish religious laws and practices.

Some years later, after having begun my college studies at New York’s City College and Brooklyn College’s Evening Session, I returned to the Yeshivah, this time to the Talmudic division, to enhance my understanding of the traditional content of rabbinic learning. Here, we studied in pairs, devoting ourselves intensively to particular tractates under the guidance of individual rabbinic scholars. I heard the inaugural lecture by the celebrated master Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik soon after he arrived in America and joined the Yeshiva faculty. But, in two successive years, my rabbinic master teachers were Rabbi Chaim Shunfenthal and Rabbi Samuel Belkin, who exemplified two different styles of teaching the Talmudic material—during the first year the tractate *Kitubot*, during the second, the tractate *Nedarim*. Rabbi Shunfenthal’s style was explication de texte, while Rabbi Belkin’s was to approach the text through a grid of the varied assumptions characterizing different schools of thought. My daytime Talmudic study preceded my evening College classes, which, among other things, introduced me to studies of Western philosophy. To the beginning task of integrating the variety of Hebrew styles and preoccupations within the Jewish sphere was added the lifelong need to integrate my Jewish interests and my growing fascination with the philosophy of the West.

I had earlier indicated my initial choice of the Teachers’ Institute of the Yeshiva by characterizing it as more modern and more oriented to spoken Hebrew, which served as its language of instruction. Why, then, the later turn to the Talmudic curriculum at Yeshiva, which was single-mindedly concentrated on traditional learning, and where the instruction was, furthermore, in Yiddish? The answer, I believe, lay in my father’s voracious appetite for the Jewish word in all its comprehensive embodiments. Talmudic learning, yes, but joined with modern developments. Modern advances in education, yes, but not at the cost of surrendering the ancient lore. This
doctrine of continuity between the old and the new underlay a further educational adventure in my career, the shift from the Yeshiva to the Jewish Theological Seminary, heir of the science of Wissenschaft and the whole-hearted embrace of modern scholarship, as well as the effort to locate Jewish learning within its ambit without sacrificing its integrity.

The Seminary had a galaxy of scholarly stars illuminating the world of Jewish learning along these lines. The faculty included the celebrated Talmudist Louis Ginsberg, author of *The Legends of the Jews*, the historical sociologist Louis Finkelstein, author of *The Pharisees*, the radical philosopher Mordecai Kaplan, who wrote *Judaism as A Civilization*, the literary scholar of Medieval Jewish poetry, Shalom Spiegel, author of *The Last Trial*, the eminent Jewish historian Alexander Marx, the Hasidic mystical thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel, the acute Biblical scholar H. L. Ginsberg, and the Hebrew poet Hillel Bavli, among others. The institution as a whole was Zionist in its sentiments and passionately Hebraic in its language orientation.

All these luminaries deepened the understanding of Hebrew that was conveyed to us in a thousand ways, from its historical embodiments to its modern exemplifications. I was especially appreciative of the influence of Hillel Bavli, who taught the classic works of the modern Hebrew rebirth. With him we read Bialik, Ahad Haam, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, for example. From him we also caught the enthusiasm for reading modern Hebrew. Earlier, many of us had read *Hadoar Lanoar*. Now, we were encouraged, with mixed success, to read *Hadoar* regularly. It was the classics, whether pre-modern or modern, that intrigued us rather than the periodicals dealing with current events, essays and criticism, as well as politics. Much of our curriculum concerned exposition, paraphrase or translation of complex classical passages and the habits involved in such efforts carried over in intriguing ways. One memorable semester a small group of us met in the home of H.L. Ginsberg reading the book of Jeremiah together; journeying through that book under the ingenious eye and the ever-surprising turns of mind of Professor Ginsberg was an indelible experience of poetry and classics as one.

Some years before, I had begun trying my hand at poetry. Some Hebrew lyrics of mine actually found their way into print, in the pages of *Niv*, a student magazine publishing the work of young Americans writing in Hebrew. I also set myself to translate Bialik’s *HaBrekha* into English, and prepared a number of Hebrew lyrics of various sorts, virtually all of which have by now completely disappeared over the years. Mine was an amateur's venture, I must emphasize, unlike the serious and lasting accomplishments of some fellow students in our Yeshiva classes, notably T. Carmi, the poet and editor of the anthology *Hebrew Verse*, and Allen Mandelbaum, translator of the *Odyssey and the Aeneid* as well as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. But I am sure the spirit of our curriculum, as well as the example of individual spectacular achievements such as the above, sensitized us to the glories of Hebrew in its varied and infinite embodiments.
With the development of Israel, came the concomitant growth of Hebrew there and its increasing differentiation from the familiar language of the classics and the schools. The novel uses, shapes, and forms of the language in Israel inspired many traditional scholars, as for example my teacher Shalom Spiegel, whose book *Hebrew Reborn* was a paean to its everyday functionality in the new State. On the other hand, the Biblical scholar H. L. Ginsberg would on occasion joke about there being two quite different languages, Hebrew and Israeli. The fact is that both attitudes are reasonable and consistent. The rebirth of Hebrew in Israel expanded the original language to unprecedented proportions, reaching into all corners of contemporary life. The expansion is a fact, and so is the difference between the traditional original and the present-day Israeli counterpart.

For those Hebrew enthusiasts who live outside Israel, the choice is clear. We either learn what H. L. Ginsberg called “Israeli” and acquire the expanded tongue, or stay with the traditional Hebrew and cope, as need dictates, given our goals. For me, living in America and incapable, at my age, of learning Israeli, I remain with the traditional Hebrew core, adding supplements as need demands and opportunity arises, e.g., by reading contemporary Hebrew writings along with English translations as available.

Conversely, for non-English Hebrew readers who might be interested in my English writings, they would either need to learn English or access them through translation. You can imagine how thrilled I am with the availability of this book, making a number of my English educational writings available in Hebrew, a project, which would certainly have been beyond me! The need somehow to overcome the language differences between Israel and *chutz la’aretz* is part and parcel with the need to ponder the educational and social differences between our communities. If, as I believe, the present book of translations advances the serious consideration of these educational and social problems, and eases the continuing communication between Israel and those of us who reside elsewhere, it will have made an enormously valuable contribution to our common Jewish life.