

And the Hebrews Learn it Backwards



And the Hebrews Learn it Backwards...Which is Absolutely frightening”

(From the hit musical *My Fair Lady*)

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (January 2022)

As a veteran, interpreter, translator and cruise ship speaker, I have often encountered the deep-rooted persistence of the language barrier that has not been ameliorated by technology but continues to draw sustenance from bias and willful ignorance as was expressed charmingly expressed in George Bernard Shaw’s play “Pygmalion” and in the lyrics from the hit musical *My Fair Lady* and the song “Why Can’t the English”

Arabians learn Arabian with the speed of summer lightning

And Hebrews learn it backwards, which is absolutely frightening

But use proper English, you're regarded as a freak

Oh, why can't the English

Why can't the English learn to speak?

A glaring example of this which caused me to do a "double take" was on a recent Mediterranean cruise in which a Hop-on Hop-off bus in the Spanish port city of Cadiz sped past me advertising its guided tour services in a recording with narration in 14 languages. After initially viewing the huge advertisement on the side of the vehicle portraying national flags representing the available languages, my joy turned to shock.

There was clearly an Israeli flag representing modern Hebrew (see photo to follow), the language known in Hebrew as "IVRIT" and written with Hebrew block letters, but which had been spelt out backwards! (The letters were arranged backward from left to right instead of the correct right to left order.)

For a Hebrew speaker, the language represented by the Israeli flag appeared to be "TIRBE'A." This is analogous to a sign advertising a translation service represented by the Union Jack offering narration in "HSILGNE." Would anyone considering choosing this service have any regard for its quality or authenticity?

What makes this monumental gaffe even more unforgivable is that right next to the Israeli flag is one with a crescent moon (frequent symbol portraying Islam and the Arabic speaking world) which is aligned correctly. Both Arabic and Hebrew are Semitic languages and written from right to left. The Spanish Hop-On – Hop Off company might have had a major political crisis on its hands similar to the "Danish Cartoon affair over the image of Muhammed but apparently no one on had taken the trouble to deal with any adverse reaction, most likely as a result of the common practice on much of the internet of

maligning and or ridiculing Jews, Israel, or portraying Hebrew which, as Professor Higgins noted, is “absolutely frightening” even if used in a different context not meant to cause any harm.

Unfortunately, such provincial views are often encouraged by those Jews who are still unable to shed the views inherited from a strong identification with the leftist “progressive” attitude in which the core value of being Jewish has been identification with the “oppressed” of all other races, religions and languages.

Often these views were accompanied by a strong emotional sympathetic attitude towards Yiddish. Such views have grown substantially over the past decade as a misplaced sympathy has grown into a misplaced veneration for Yiddish without any consideration to the more than five decades of persecution and negation of modern Hebrew in the USSR and Soviet bloc satellite states by Jewish communists, who for several decades were in positions of power and influence. These same puppets of the regime eventually suffered the embarrassment and humiliation of being denounced for promoting “Jewish nationalism”, the same charge that had been used to label devotees of Hebrew.

The popular film, “The First Wives Club” opens with a telling scene in which Bette Midler, playing an American Jewish housewife, intrudes on her teenage son Jason, who is listening to some rock group on his Walkman, and triumphantly tells him that she was able to hire his favorite rock band for his bar-mitzvah ceremony. He is overjoyed, exclaiming “that’s cool!” She then rips out the cassette he has been listening to and inserts another one. He listens for a moment and exclaims with a look of pained boredom on his face his surprise hearing “...Baruch Ata Adonai....(sounds like gibberish to him) and asks “What’s this?” She responds – “*It’s Hebrew! Learn it! Your Bar-Mitzvah is in three weeks – It’s the only thing your father will pay for– Don’t embarrass me at the synagogue.*”

Somewhat later on in the film after the bar-Mitzvah, the three jilted wives are arguing in the kitchen berating each other for not having been in close touch during all their married years. Goldie Hawn accuses Bette Midler of not even having invited her to the Bar-Mitzvah. Diane Keaton attempts to pacify the angry Goldie by excusing that oversight ...*"But you wouldn't have come"* to which Diane further excuses this behavior ...*"and, it was in Hebrew!"* (as if to say how could a non-Jew expect to make heads or tails of anything).

Many of the students I taught in introductory courses entered the class not even knowing that "Ivrit" is the Hebrew word for Hebrew matching the ignorance of the Spanish bus company! This indicates a serious deficiency in education and ethnic identification with Israel that would simply be unimaginable in the case of Finnish-Americans not knowing what Suomi is, or Hungarian-Americans, Magyar.

During the pre-statehood period, Jews in the Diaspora sympathetic to Zionism regarded it as the most productive part of the new and dynamic largely secular Hebrew culture being created by the generations of pioneers. Today, by and large, it lacks even the attraction and fascination for Diaspora Jews that it held for many Christian theologians and clergymen who felt the power of the language they believed God first used to speak to man.

The Academy of the Hebrew Language describes Hebrew as "the thread that has bound the Jewish people together for millennia, both in liturgy and literature, and, in ancient times, as a spoken language." In the context of modern Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel, a crucial and absolutely essential achievement was the revival of Hebrew and the formation of what is now known as Modern Hebrew (IVRIT).

Due to large migration waves to Israel, many unofficial languages are spoken in the country, including Yiddish and German; Russian, the most widely spoken unofficial language,

has semi-official status in some areas. A majority of Israel's male Arab population are proficient in Hebrew and use it in their occupations or profession. Some estimates put the number of Hebrew speakers at close to 9 million worldwide.

The first Zionist Congress was held in 1897 and lagged two decades behind the modern Zionist settlement in Palestine. Theodor Herzl started his career in journalism as many other professional and assimilated Jews hoping for a gradual evolution of civil rights and equality for all minority ethnic groups in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was shocked by the Dreyfus trial and the realization that only a radical territorial solution that would return Jews to the world's political stage was the answer for those individuals who did not wish to be assimilated or would ultimately be rejected in their efforts to do so. He envisioned a cosmopolitan state not tied to religion and bringing progress and enlightenment to the Near East. His vision of the future language of a Jewish State did not imagine that Hebrew could be revived or made fit for the 20th century.

Hebrew's eventual success was the result of a combination of factors and unique circumstances that other nations were unable to duplicate. Jews migrating to Palestine had no other common language and no other argument could so successfully verify the Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel. Countless everyday documents, scrolls, archives, letters, tombstones, and monuments from past millennia written and carved on stone, wood, clay, papyrus and paper have been uncovered, all of which "speak Hebrew," confirming the Jewish attachment to the land.

As Hillel Halkin put it so succinctly: *"Any alternative to Hebrew would have meant the loss of Zionism's historical content, the political consequences of which would have been to degrade the movement into the mere colonizing enterprise its enemies always viewed it as being and so doom it in advance."*

Many tourists in Israel miss out on much that is not available by instant translations. All laws, debates in the Knesset, the legal cases in court, and applications for patents, are, of course in Hebrew but in both a literal and figurative sense, Israelis and Jews abroad “don’t speak the same language”. Israeli affairs portrayed by the media in the Diaspora often rely on English language source material or are based on highly selected and fragmentary extracts of published material translated and occasionally mistranslated from Hebrew.

Although many people with an interest in Israel are aware of the importance of the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language and may recognize the name of pioneer linguist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, they do not appreciate the difficulties involved or the exciting story of what challenges were posed before the eventual accomplishment of what almost all linguists had declared impossible.

This is a remarkable story that deserves to be told to a mass audience. It is also an introduction to the special attributes of the Hebrew language, its borrowing from the rich historic flourishing of past civilizations of the Near and Middle East and the ingenious mechanism of neologisms inherent in the structure of the language. Moreover, it is the story of the three generations long world-wide rivalry with Yiddish and the techniques used to make Hebrew into a language capable of handling all the demands of a modern society.

Not knowing Modern Hebrew, neither many adults or children in the Diaspora are familiar with Israeli authors, playwrights, movie directors, actors, singers, pop singers, athletes, or the standings of Israel’s football (soccer) clubs, the elements of a national culture.

Speakers of Hebrew outside Israel, the so called “*yordim*” (ex-Israelis who have settled permanently abroad), constitute a widespread new Diaspora but who retain knowledge of their primary or habitual language at home and, like other ethnic

groups, follow events in their former homeland through the internet, press, frequent visits and books so that they keep abreast of the country's development. Their language is not shared by the inhabitants of any other state, nor is it understood by their "fellow Jews" in the Diaspora. This gap in Hebrew and Israel knowledge is often embarrassingly detrimental to a sense of solidarity in many Jewish communities.

Some critics of Modern Hebrew courses maintain that Jewish students are offered a curriculum that is no different than other foreign languages rather than a form of self-affirmation or insight into Jewish religious tradition and practice. It is indeed difficult to answer such disparate needs in introductory courses but the criticism is valid up to a point. It might be fascinating for the students to learn how related words have a definite bearing on ethical issues – for example the close connection between the words ReHeM (womb) and RaHManut (mercy) that some Jewish "progressives" who support demands for the "right" to abortion prefer to ignore or that the prophets preaching social justice nevertheless supported an independent priesthood maintained by a flat-tax "tithe."

What do these students miss if they stop at a one or two years level of college Hebrew? They miss out on much of the exciting developments in Israel ignored by the general media. The State of Israel suffers from damaging attacks by considerable media bias, disgruntled academics with an axe to grind and from many hostile critics due to pre-existing prejudices and a complete ignorance of Modern Hebrew. These same critics ...

1. are unable to directly check original Hebrew sources to accurately weigh the Israeli side of many issues
2. never question the legitimacy of wholly artificial creations such as Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Indonesia, Pakistan and a dozen states in Africa that cross linguistic, religious and tribal lines, all of which lack any historical

identity, common language (except one imposed by coercion), territorial contiguity and sense of nationhood.

Professor Higgins was quite mistaken about learning Hebrew being absolutely frightening, neither is it trivial. Cecil Roth, one of the most prominent Jewish historians of modern times, had this to say of the English translation of the Hebrew Bible: "Generation after generation of Englishmen heard the Bible read in church and studied it at home. In many cases, it was the only book; in all, the principal book. Its cadences, its music, its phraseology, sank into his mind and became part of his being. Hence by slow degrees his daily speech was not merely enriched, but to some extent molded by its influence."

[Table of Contents](#)

Norman Berdichevsky is a Contributing Editor to *New English Review* and is the author of [*The Left is Seldom Right*](#) and [*Modern Hebrew: The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language*](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)