

Teach Mother Hebrew

By Burt Keimach

"For thirteen hundred years, from the conquest of Palestine until after the war of Bar-Kochba, the Jews spoke Hebrew. Then they stopped speaking Hebrew, and for over sixteen centuries spoke various languages, until Hebrew began to be spoken again in Palestine about 90 years ago. However, through the period of the Exile (70 C.E. to 1948) Jews never ceased reading and writing in Hebrew. A vast literature was composed, including books on religious lore, philosophy, natural science, as well as light literature, religious and secular poetry, plays, travelogues and historical works." So writes Professor Chaim Rabin, international expert on Hebrew. What then, is happening to Hebrew in 1978?

Burt Keimach, who writes on this with tongue in cheek, is a new immigrant from the U.S.A. who has his own problems with the language. He hopes, he says, to overcome them for Israel's fiftieth anniversary.

There is a famous, and by now well-worn story about an old learned Jew who emigrated to America at the turn of the century. Asked about his ability to speak many languages, he replied, "Dets chrite. Ey kin spik siven lungvuadges - hinglish de besht!"

In Israel, today, thirty years after independence, such an immigrant would find quite a different situation. Almost no matter what his level of education, he would influence his children, his friends, and almost everyone with whom he spoke to communicate in his new language, Hebrew. After all, it would be new to about half of them as well.

There are countless stories about how the language was revived. But what they all come down to is the simple fact that the people who live here have done all the reviving. So it is to all speakers of Hebrew, both the native born and the new immigrants, that we must look for a true understanding of the flippant, the irreverent, the satirical, and even the affectionate uses we have come to understand as part of the modern vernacular. "Super Sol"

When you get your income tax form back from the government there is a very popular expression used by one and all -- "Zeh lo fair" (That's not fair). Whether it is or not really doesn't concern the local bureaucrats, so they are likely to counter with a quick "zebashcha" -- short for "zu bayah shelchah," for that's your tough luck, friend.

Or, as you are leaving the phone booth you are accused by a 200 year old lady of stealing time from her, if you can imagine that, by your incessant "chizbatim al ha telephone." Chizbat isn't even a good word in Arabic, from which it was lifted. But since you don't know it means something like a tall story, you are so busy apologizing to the old dame that you stumble over your words, not mention a crack in the pavement, and oops! From your prone position on the ground you see a big sign over a supermarket that says "Super Sol." Actually, the storeowner prefers that you not take up space in front of his entrance by spreading your body all over the ground, but since you are in such a reflective spot you think that he, the owner, is trying to be clever and show everyone how much English he knows. "Big Sun" right? Wrong! Old Hebrew for overflowing or abundant basket.

The encouraging thing about all this is that people are beginning to write the same way they think and speak. The phenomenon of diglossia, so common in the Middle Ages, of having separate languages for separate functions, is disappearing. You don't need Church Latin anymore. So now you can write, and create, and once in a while even think if you're inclined, in the same language your mother taught you. But come to think of it, if you are an Israeli, your mother probably didn't teach you Hebrew at all. You taught her! The Language Didn't Die

Working on a solid base of Biblical Hebrew, with admixtures of Mishnaic, or a later kind of Hebrew used by compilers of the Talmud, helps when you are creating a new modern language. But when you add still more elements, like the rich vocabularies of the Medieval poets, translators, and prose writers, not to mention the host of work turned out in Eastern Europe during the 19th century, you multiply your original Biblical fund of 8000 works by at



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A MAN AMONG MEN "MAY HE REST IN PEACE"

least five. Then, by the time you are finished with technical words from this century, plus a few thousand direct borrowings from other modern tongues, you end up with a working vocabulary of over 60,000.

These things were made easier by the fact that in spite of the tongue not being spoken for nearly two thousand years, Hebrew was by no means dead. The language survived not only as a mere lingua franca among Jews of different countries, but as a language of learning and prayer as well. Very often, even though a Jew might not be able to read and write his own spoken native language, he was quite proficient at understanding the written word in his ancient Hebrew idiom.

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