

More possibly relevant material

Two essays on aspects of the Hebrew language and Jewish and Israeli culture: *Israel through Coffee*, and *Alephbet Soup*

IIIa.

Grounds for Miracles: Putting the "Brew" in "Hebrew," or: Israel Through Coffee

Miracle or Mud?

The favorite joke of one of my sons when he was about four years old was this (translated from the original Hebrew): "A man was walking along, fell into a hole, and couldn't get out.' God,' he prayed, 'make a miracle for me!' God answered: 'With sugar or without sugar?'"

Now, in order to get this joke, you have to understand that the word for "miracle" in Hebrew is *nes*, which also means "instant coffee." So, if you ask someone to make you (a) *nes*, you're more likely to get a cup of coffee than a miracle. Even from God.

Nes, by the way, is actually short for *nescafe*, which though the brand name of a type of coffee made by Nestle, is generic in Israel for "instant coffee." The correct term for that light brown powder dissolved in hot water (which is hardly divine, by any standard) would be *kafeh names*, literally "dissolving coffee." Pronounced 'nah-mess,' compared to other types of coffee, it indeed involves less mess, and thus is somewhat miraculous.

Today Israel boasts world-class cafes in most cities and a burgeoning coffee culture, with a plethora of brews to fit every discerning palate. But once *nes* was one of a mere two types of Israeli coffee.

The other was a sort of Turkish coffee that, instead of being cooked on the stove, is simply mixed in water like *nes*. But since it is essentially unbrewed coffee grounds, the miraculous dissolution does not occur. This leaves a thick, black sludge at the bottom of the glass, which looks a lot like mud, or in Hebrew, *botz*, which became the name for this potent beverage, usually served in small glass cups.

It's not hard to imagine the *chalutzim*, Israeli pioneers, after a hearty mug of muddy *botz* in the morning, going out to drain the swamps, the *bitzot* (same root), whose black peat looked and probably smelled about the same.



Inside-out, Upside-down, and Backwards...

These two types of coffee seemed to define the two poles of Israeli reality: miracle or mud. Roses or thorns, paragon or pariah: a country of extremes. And it's no accident that these are opposites. For the third type of coffee, which came on the scene a little later is קפה הפוך *kafeh hafuch*, or simply הפוך *hafuch*, meaning "opposite," or "reversed." Or upside-down, or inside-out, or backwards – for the Hebrew word הפוך *hafuch* means all those things.

In the case of coffee, though, it really only means something between a cappuccino and a latte (or café au lait): a shot of espresso, with a lot of milk, and possibly some whipped or steamed milk, depending on your taste. It's not clear whether this is considered הפוך *hafuch*, backwards or reversed, because the hot milk is poured in first, and only then the coffee, or simply because as opposed to נס *nes*, which is a lot of water and a little milk, this is the opposite.

Many claim that this is a unique Israeli blend, but it turns out that in Holland, something like this type of coffee exists and is called *verkeerd*, "incorrect" or "cockeyed," not unlike הפוך *hafuch*. Who knows? The Turkish influence on Israeli coffee culture is clear, perhaps there is Dutch influence as well.

From Cups to Coups

The root of the word הפוך *hafuch* is ה-פ-כ *h-f-ch*, which may not evoke the same symbolism as do 'miracles' and 'mud,' but is also central to Israeli culture and history. The very oscillation between the 'roses' and the 'thorns' is an indication that reality here is very הפכפך *hafachpach*, a beautiful word that means "changeable," "volatile," or "erratic." It is in a form that repeats the second syllable ("f" and "p" being alternates of the same medial letter) to make it a descriptor, and almost onomatopoeic at that: one can almost hear the flip-flops.

Probably the most well-known use of this root was by the legendary newscaster Haim Yavin, who narrated the results of the election polls in the game-changing vote of 1977, when the Labor party was ousted, and the Likud, under the leadership of Menachem Begin came to power for the first time in the history of the State. When Yavin received the breaking news that the polls showed Likud with a significant lead, he summed it up in a word: "מהפך *Mahapach!*," a reversal, an upset, a sea change.

In saying this, Yavin meant that this was not nearly a מהפיכה *mahapecha*, a full-out "revolution." And since it was achieved by fully democratic means, neither was it a הפיכה *haficha*, a coup d'etat. But all of these words from ה-פ-כ *h-f-ch* signify different political developments that turn things, well, inside-out, upside-down, or backwards – at least relative to previous regimes or norms.



Likud's liberal economic policy, especially in an era that also featured Thatcher and Reagan, led to the opening up of the Israeli economy, and globalization that spawned what might be called מהפיכת הקפה *mahapechat hakafeh*, 'a coffee revolution,' branching out beyond נס *nes* and בוץ *botz*, miracle and mud, to all the various beans and brews, sizes and strengths that are available on almost any street corner. If this seems decadent or hedonist or a betrayal of that *chalutzic* pioneering spirit to you, remember, there is often nothing new under the Middle Eastern sun. It was back in the early '60s, with the early-state austerity years easing up, that Tel Aviv cafés got their first espresso machines. This led author and Knesset member Yizhar Smilansky (known by his pen name S. Yizhar) to castigate youngsters enjoying the good life of Tel Aviv rather than taming the wilderness, with the snarky term דור האספרסו *dor ha-espresso*, "the espresso generation." A lot of Israeli coffee has been drunk since then...

Even though the Starbucks chain famously failed in Israel, it seems that the global coffee culture is here to stay. But regarding the perennially difficult political situation Israel seems to be in, if someone were to say that that too is permanent, that there is no way out, we would say: להיפך *lehefech!* "Au contraire!" Hope springs eternal, and we have to believe that there's still room for some surprising תהפוכות *tahapuchot* – turnarounds, changes of direction, though at times it may seem like this requires nothing short of a נס *nes*.

IIIb.

Alphabet Soup

Athens and Jerusalem are often seen as diametric opposites, the two poles of Western civilization. For what could be more different than Greek and Hebrew? They are even written in opposite directions. As Israeli poet David Avidan once wrote, the one goes West to East, the other East to West.

But if the alphabet – or rather, the אלף-בית *aleph-bet* - is any indication, they share more than we usually think.

The first letters of the Greek alphabet are: α , β , γ , δ - alpha, beta, gamma, delta. And Hebrew? א, ב, ג, ד - aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet.

This isn't coincidence: it indicates that there really is only one alphabetic writing system in the world. Not only Greek but also Arabic, Latin, Cyrillic and others come from the same ancient Semitic system, Phoenician to be specific, of which Hebrew is just one contemporary example.

But in Hebrew, the names of most of the letters actually mean something. They are words, not just sounds.

We can see this just from the first letter of the Hebrew aleph-bet, and the words derived from its root.



Of trained oxen

There are some things you should know about aleph. First, while it is a consonant, the sound of the letter is what's known as a "glottal stop," which is hardly a sound at all (think the syllable "unh" in the negative "unh-unh.") And so, the aleph takes the sound of the vowel that goes with it.

Second, the consonants comprising the word *aleph* itself, א-ל-פ *aleph-l-p* (the last can be "p" or "ph" depending on its position) make up a complete root with its own meaning: "tame" or "train."

Now, there is a connection between the root and the letter, the meaning and the form.

From the meaning "tame," the original ancient symbol for the letter aleph was shaped like the head of an ox, known as an אֵלֶף *eleph* – the biggest domesticated animal in the Near East. The verb is לֵאלֵף *le-aleph*, and the noun is אֵילוּף *iluph* – as in אֵילוּף כְּלָבִים *iluph klavim*, "dog training" or the more Shakespearean, אֵילוּף הַסּוֹרֶרֶת *Iluph Hasoreret*, "The Taming of the Shrew."

Hebrew Dumbo

As far as large, tamable animals go, believe it or not, the word "elephant" may be part of this linguistic family.

After the immediate Latin and Greek antecedents, most dictionaries list the origin as foreign or obscure. The venerable Oxford English Dictionary mentions the Hebrew *eleph* as a possible cognate indicative of ancient Semitic origins.

There's more to the root than oxen, dogs and elephants. For instance, a place of training, and in modern Israel – a school to learn Hebrew, is an אולפן *ulpan*. Someone who says: "I'm just starting out in אֵלֶף כִּתָּה אולפן *ulpan kitah aleph*, (first grade, as it were) and I'm learning the *aleph-bet*," has just used the aleph-l-ph root three times.

The feminine form of the noun, אולפנה *ulpanah*, is the sister institution of the yeshiva, that is, a religious training school for girls.

אולפן *Ulpan* also has the general meaning of "studio," used in contexts like אולפני דיסני *Ulpanei Disney*, "Disney Studios." While they do have a very animated approach – don't go there to study Hebrew.

The tamer

The person on top doing the 'taming,' as it were, was the אלוף *aluph*, which in modern Hebrew means two things – though if sports is a version of war, then maybe they're not so different.

One meaning of אלוף *aluph* is the military rank of "general." Even in these days of cyberwar, achieving the rank of general requires prowess and proven ability, preferably in victorious combat. Thus the other meaning is that of "champion."

Soccer teams vie for the אליפות *aliphut*, "championship," and in Europe there is the ליגת האלופות *Ligat Ha-aluphot*, "the League of Champions."



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We haven't nearly covered everything from ת - א *aleph* to ת, which is the last letter of the aleph-bet, and is roughly the same shape as the last Greek letter, Ω omega. But if you don't learn your Hebrew letters, someone may call you אֲנֹלֶפֶת *analphabet*, the thoroughly Greek construction - "an-", negation, + alphabet - which is literally, "illiterate," meaning essentially, that Hebrew is Greek to you!

