

Fateful Linguistic Choices at the Crossroads of History

(A little vignette to present dramatically the importance of language, and the choice among languages, as representing central Jewish historical challenges and dilemmas).

The time: the second half of the 19th century.

The place: Eastern Europe, the demographic center of world Jewry.

You are a young Jew, and you have some urgent choices to make. Everything is changing, the world is in flux, and there are so many movements, so many ideologies, vying for your allegiance. One thing is certain: you can't just sit and do nothing, you can't ignore the historical maelstrom taking place around and "stay the same" – whatever that means.

Here are only some of the life choices that you are confronted with, at home, in your *shtetl* or town, in print, everywhere. Each of them carries a different promise of either making the world a better place, or at the very least, improving the conditions of your own personal life.

You could:

- ❖ Heed the call to raise the barricades, reject modernity, and become what would later become known as *ultra-Orthodox*;
or:
- ❖ Heed the call for economic reform, and become a secular Jewish socialist (a Bundist);
or:
- ❖ Heed the call to remain religiously Jewish, while adapting to modernity, thus becoming a Reform Jew;
or:
- ❖ Heed the communist revolutionary call, and become a Marxist;
or:
- ❖ Heed the national call, or the call of personal advancement and acceptance, and assimilate into your host country;
or:
- ❖ Heed the call of personal advancement to emigrate to the *Goldene Medina*, the United States;
or:
- ❖ Heed a universalist call, rejecting identities and nationalities, and become a cosmopolitan;
or:
- ❖ Heed the Jewish national call and become a Zionist, perhaps even emigrate to (what was then called) Palestine.



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These are not abstract intellectual choices. They are not political parties to vote for. They are life choices that you must make NOW. They will determine where you will live, who you will associate with, the work that you will do, and even what language you will speak.

What language? It's hard to believe, for those of us living in countries with one or at most two languages to choose from or function in, where language seems like a stable part of the scenery, but each of these visions of a future among which you must choose could in fact be linked to entirely different languages:

- ❖ *Ultra-orthodox?* Stick with **Yiddish**, language of home and *yeshiva* in traditional Eastern European religious Jewish society.
- ❖ *Bundist?* Same *mame loshen* ("mother's language"), but the worldlier **secularized Yiddish** that is the language of theater, politics, literature and general Jewish society.
- ❖ *Reform?* This is a primarily Western European phenomenon: the seat of classical Reform and its central language (and that of the other modernizing religious movements, including modern Orthodoxy) is **German**.
- ❖ *Marxist* unrest was brewing in the Slavic countries, so if you saw your future here – it would be in **Russian**, on the way to becoming the language of Bolshevism and revolution.
- ❖ *Assimilation* – renouncing one's particularist identity, fitting in and promoting the general good of one's homeland – means speaking the **vernacular** of whatever country you happened to be in: German or Russian, but also Polish, Czech, Hungarian, etc.
- ❖ If you're going to move to *America* – you better learn **English** fast, or you'll be stuck for good as a greenhorn on the Lower East Side.
- ❖ The hope for a post-nationalist, *cosmopolitan* Europe was embodied in the newly established universal language, **Esperanto** (meaning "hope"), belonging to everyone and no one, and invented by a Jew named Ludwig Lazar (Eliezer) Zamenhoff.
- ❖ If you were to throw your lot in with the *Zionists*, you might not be sure yet what language this entails. But that other great Jewish language activist, also called Eliezer, who took the name Ben Yehudah, is at this point making Zionism inseparably associated with the age-old but recently renewed *other* Jewish language – **Hebrew**.

Looking forward from that point, it's hard to decide which seems most promising. For most, though, the *least* promising, the most unlikely, was surely the Zionist option, and the idea of reviving an ancient language that was about as vital and relevant as Latin. While many more saw the promise of the New World, it was hardly the English language that was calling to them, to replace the richness of Russian, the grandeur of German, or the *heimish*-ness ("comfortable hominess") of their Yiddish.

But, out of all these forks in the road, it was actually those two choices – America or Israel – and the corresponding two languages, English and Hebrew, that were the ones that worked as long-term solutions for the Jewish people and didn't prove dead-ends, more or less catastrophic.



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Today, a hundred and some years later, 90% of the Jewish people the world over live in these two languages: half of those in countries whose national language is English, and half in the country whose language is Hebrew.

Eliezer Ben Yehudah, acknowledged as the father of Modern Hebrew, wasn't just a pedantic dictionary editor: his vision of a secular, spoken Hebrew changed the course of Jewish history, creating both opportunities and challenges. We are the heirs to that miraculous transformation, even those of us who don't live in a Hebrew-speaking society, or speak the language fluently. For while Hebrew is unfamiliar to most, it isn't a *foreign* language, it's part of our heritage, part of what connects us both to our past, to other Jews, and to Israel and the Jewishness of its culture.

We face our own choices, both personally and collectively. They may seem less momentous than those of our forebears; they too however will contribute to charting Jewish journeys in the 21st century. They involve choice and opportunity: How to deepen, broaden and enrich our lives? How to strengthen personal identity and connection to peoplehood? And our choices too involve language, or languages, and how to express that Jewishness and those connections.

