

## Old-New Hebrew: Jewish and Israeli, Holy and Daily

"Speak up the language of the Hebrew man  
Loud and clear, the language of the Hebrew man  
It is the language of the prophets, of the sign up on the wall  
It is old and sacred, it will open up your soul"

*The Language of the Hebrew Man* (by Israeli rock star, Ehud Banai, original, ironically, in English...)

Of all the accomplishments of the Zionist movement, Modern Hebrew is the most creative, the most dialogical, the most global – and by far the least controversial.

Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words*, Yale, 2012, p. 173.

In the words of the immortal ogre Shrek, ogres are like onions because they both have layers. If so, Jews then are like Hebrew – for both have roots. We have roots in memory and *mishpocheh*, family, in tradition and in territory – the Land and State of Israel. The Hebrew language has roots because most Hebrew words are based on just three letters, each root being a building block of meaning that contains and expresses Jewish values through the ages. These Hebrew roots make connections between words, and through them connect: Jews with one another all over the world, Jews with God and spirituality, Jews everywhere with Israel, ancient texts and modern talk, holy words and daily life, a tribal people and a global world.

Take the root ש-מ-ע, *sh-m-'ayin*. You may recognize there the word we know in its imperative form: שמע – *Shema!* "Hear!" – as in the most central "prayer" in all of Judaism, the watchword of monotheism – "The Shema": "Hear O Israel, the Lord (is) our God, the Lord is One." In many ways, that one word encapsulates the importance of language in general, and the Hebrew language in particular, because where for others "seeing is believing," for us, "believing is hearing." It turns out that also, 'doing' is 'hearing' is 'believing': the people of Israel responded to commandments, to the call to holiness, with נעשה ונשמע, *na'aseh ve-nishma*: "we shall do, and we shall hear."

Where there's hearing there's speaking, all kinds of speaking. And in all kinds of Jewish languages throughout history. Talmudic argumentation often begins with the Aramaic invitation: תא שמע, *ta shma'* – "come and hear this...". And if you ever chatted – or chatted up – someone in Yiddish, you *schmoozed*, which is from the Hebrew שמועות, *shmu'ot*, "things that are heard, rumors," or in its Yiddish pronunciation *shmuus*.

And now, anywhere in Israel, how should you greet an old friend or a new acquaintance? With the most common street-Hebrew possible: מה נשמע? – *ma nishma?* "What's happening? What's going on?" – literally: "what is heard." The speaking, and the hearing continues...

How about another example, OK? OK it is. OK in Hebrew is בסדר – *beseder*. It come from the root ס-ד-ר, *s-d-r*, whose basic meaning is "order." This one root connects all strata of Jewish history, from religion to the military to television and more.



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For instance, you may be familiar with two of the oldest uses of this root: the name for the Passover meal, the סדר, *sefer*; and סידור *sidur*, the Hebrew word for "prayer book." But why would a meal and a book come from the same root? It turns out that both have to do with this underlying idea of "order."

If you've ever been to a *sefer* it is a highly 'ordered' ritual – an evening-long ceremony with 15 separate components, and only one of which is the actual meal! So it can be a blooming buzzing confusion if you don't keep to the script. And the Jewish prayer book, the *siddur*, is also very particular about the order of prayers for morning, afternoon, night. So these two central religious institutions express the value of, and the need for, order.

There are many other words that use this root. Here is a non-exhaustive list:

1. In the religious realm:
  - a. סדר *sefer* - the ordered Passover meal
  - b. סידור *sidur* - the ordered prayer book
2. In the Israeli military world:
  - a. סדיר *sadir* – standing ("regular") army
  - b. הסדר *hesder* - "arrangement" combining yeshiva study and military service
  - c. מסדר *misdar* - inspection
3. In the social and cultural sphere:
  - a. הסתדרות *histadrut* - literally, "organization," the name of the national labor union
  - b. סידרה *sidrah* - originally the weekly Torah portion- now a weekly "oracle" of a different sort- a TV series. (That brings us, as it were, from 'breaking bread' to "Breaking Bad").
4. And as mentioned: the ubiquitous בסדר *beseder*, Israeli for "OK", and the core of the Israeli national philosophy of "getting by" that is the answer to every question from inquiries about your health to queries regarding the state of the world: יהיה בסדר *yihyeh beseder*! Loosely translated, "what are you worried about? Everything will be alright."

The miraculous thing about roots is that when treated with care and nurturing they can grow into full blown plants. For almost two thousand years, the Jewish people lived with Hebrew in their souls, but not necessarily in their mouths. Jews throughout the Diaspora poured out their emotions daily in prayer in Hebrew; they poured over Scripture and its meanings, in Hebrew; rabbis posed questions to one another in international correspondence, in Hebrew. What didn't they do? They didn't pass the salt in Hebrew, they didn't get mad in Hebrew, they didn't milk the cow in Hebrew – in short, they didn't speak the language in daily discourse. It was not a vernacular. The spoken languages were Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and the myriad other languages that Jews developed in the lands of dispersion (and in the land of Israel as well!) that functioned as the insider's languages of the different communities of Jewish people.

With the revival of the Hebrew language, a monumental task begun at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, laying the groundwork for Israeli culture and the founding of the State of Israel, a new stage in Jewish history, a new way of being Jewish came into existence.



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Hebrew is as old as the Bible, and its rebirth into a spoken language that we work, play, love, fight and curse in is one of the unambiguous and uncontroversial successes of Jewish and Israeli renewal of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It is a miracle story that is studied all over the world. Hebrew is a small tribal language with big global reach, and it is a cultural treasure that is uniquely ours.

This miracle is shared by the State of Israel and its Hebrew speaking residents, with the Jewish people all over the world. While Jews outside of Israel don't live in a Hebrew speaking society, acquiring the language as a native tongue, Hebrew is no less their birthright, and familiarization with it – anywhere from a few words to more facility or fluency – adds breadth and depth to any Jewish education and identity.

While for many in the United States and other countries, it is difficult to imagine having the time and dedication to master Hebrew. But, it is equally difficult to imagine a Jewish world without Hebrew at all. What if the Hebrew language, Hebrew study and all Hebrew words were to disappear tomorrow? Some Jewish teens might not mourn the loss of Hebrew school. But could we really conceive of a Jewish life without *mazal tov!*, *bar mitzvah*, *chuppah*, *brit (brit)*, *Torah*? And the many, many other words that give Jewish life its flavor and character?

Hebrew is the great connector of the Jewish people. It spans otherwise seemingly unbridgeable divides: between Sephardi/Mizrachi and Ashkenazi, between religious and secular, between ancient texts and contemporary challenges, and even – as a Semitic language close to Arabic – potentially also between the State of Israel and its neighbors.

The age-old universal vision of peace is expressed in one familiar Hebrew word: שלום, *shalom*, (Arabic, *salaam*). It is much more than simply "no war," it is a vision of wholeness and unity, from the root *shalem* "whole," also a part of the vision of Jerusalem, ירושלים, Yeru-shalayim.

*Questions for discussion and further study:*

Jewish values in Hebrew (2 examples):

1. What do you think it says about the Jewish approach to wealth and poverty and relationships and solidarity between people in a society that the word צדקה, *tzedakah*, which means "giving to the poor" comes from the root צ-ד-ק, *tz-d-k*, "justice" – and not like "charity," from the Latin *caritas* – "love"?
2. We often associate "prayer" with asking for things, whether world peace or a new bicycle. The Hebrew for "to pray" is להתפלל, *lehitpalel*, which is the root פ-ל-ל, *p-l-l*, which means "judge" in the reflexive form, meaning – to do to yourself. How would you translate this word then in its most literal sense, and what does this say about the act of prayer?

From Tribal to Global: Hebrew as part of English culture

3. Hebrew has contributed many words and phrases to the world's languages, including English. There are some obvious ones – amen, cherub halleluyah, messiah, Sabbath and Satan. But you may want to check out the surprising meaning, derivations and Hebrew



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origins of these: abbey, Armageddon, bedlam, behemoth, "grapes of wrath," leviathan, macabre, scapegoat, shibboleth, and even cider.

### Life in Translation:

4. Some claim that we don't need to focus so much valuable time and resources on teaching Hebrew, since most Jews around the world, including Israelis, speak English, and most ancient and modern Jewish texts (Torah, Talmud, literature, philosophy, history, etc.) exist in good and available translations. What do you think of this claim? Does translation expand our horizons to other sources, or limit our world to our own language? What is lost and what is gained in translation?

### From Shul to Street

5. Another claim "against Hebrew," this time against the changes wrought by the Israeli spoken Hebrew revolution, is that a language that was THE holy tongue, a pure vessel for God, Torah and spirituality, has been dragged into the gutter, and now one can talk in perfect Hebrew about sports and sex, politics and technology, media and the military. This is of course not only a claim about Hebrew, but about Israel: in becoming "normal," a people like any other with a state and a spoken language of our own – have we lost our specialness? Our different character? Our holy purpose? Or is becoming like everyone else a good thing: no longer weird, exceptional, separate, unnatural?

