

○ DO ISRAELIS UNDERSTAND THE HEBREW BIBLE?

Ghil'ad Zuckermann

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The Hebrew Bible should be taught like a foreign language in Israel too, argues Ghil'ad Zuckermann, inter alia endorsing Avraham Ahuvia's recently-launched translation of the Old Testament into what Zuckermann calls high-register 'Israeli'. According to Zuckermann, *Tanakh RAM* fulfills the mission of 'red 'el ha'am' not only in its Hebrew meaning (Go down to the people) but also – more importantly – in its Yiddish meaning ('red' meaning 'speak!', as opposed to its colorful communist sense). Ahuvia's translation is most useful and dignified. Given its high register, however, Zuckermann predicts that the future promises consequent translations into more colloquial forms of Israeli, a beautifully multi-layered and intricately multi-sourced language, of which to be proud.

In 1996 President Ezer Weizman visited the University of Cambridge to familiarize himself with the famous collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts known as the Cairo Genizah. He was introduced to the Regius Professor of Hebrew, who had been nominated by the Queen of England herself. Hearing 'Hebrew,' the friendly president clapped the don on the shoulder and asked *má nishmà*, the common Israeli 'what's up?' greeting, which is, in fact, a calque – loan translation – of the Yiddish phrase *vos hért zikh*, usually pronounced *vsértsekh* and literally meaning 'what's heard?'

To Weizman's astonishment, the distinguished Hebrew professor didn't have the faintest clue whatsoever about what the president 'wanted from his life'. As an expert of the Old Testament, he wondered whether Weizman was alluding to Deuteronomy 6:4: 'Shemá' Yisraél' (Hear, O Israel). Knowing neither Yiddish *vsértsekh*, Russian (Что слышно *chto slyshno*), Polish (co slychac), nor Romanian (ce se aude) – *a fortiori* Israeli – the Cantabrigian don had no chance whatsoever of guessing the actual meaning of this beautiful, economical expression.

Semiticist Edward Ullendorff has claimed that Isaiah could have easily understood Israeli (personal communication). Compared with Ullendorff I am 'ul-yamím' (very young) but I propose that his statement is false – unless of course he referred to Isaiah Leibowitz, yet another prophet. To begin with, Isaiah the Biblical would have found it extremely difficult to even decode the European pronunciation of Israeli speakers. But the more important – and much less hypothetical – question is: Do Israelis understand Isaiah?

In the last ten years, I have sadly acquired many enemies because I insisted that Israelis not only do not understand the Bible, but much worse: they misunderstand it without even realizing it! By and large, Israeli speakers are the worst students in *advanced* studies of the Bible. Against this background, I was delighted to hear about the project launched by the impressively-experi-

enced Bible teacher Avraham Ahuvia, as well as the insightful publisher Rafi Mozes, acronymized in the biblionym (in both senses) ‘Tanakh RAM’.

Israeli, somewhat misleadingly also known as ‘Modern Hebrew,’ is a multifaceted, fascinating fin-de-siècle (120 year-old) Semito-European hybrid language. It is mosaic rather than Mosaic *tout court*. Its grammar is based not only on ‘sleeping beauty’ – or ‘walking dead’ – Hebrew, but simultaneously also on Yiddish, the revivalists’ *māme loshn* (mother tongue), as well as on a plethora of other languages spoken by the founders of Israeli, e.g. Polish, Russian, German, French, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and Arabic. Notwithstanding, Israel’s Education Ministry axiomatically assumes that Israeli is simply an organic evolution of Hebrew and that the Bible is thus written in the very same language – albeit in a higher register, of course – spoken by Israeli pupils at primary and secondary schools. Needless to say, the publishers of Hartom-Cassuto, and other volumes providing numerous glosses to the unfathomable Biblical verses, have benefited a lot from such **imprisoning purism prism**, which might be somewhat related to self-righteousness, hubris or simply conservatism or blindness on behalf of Israel’s educational system.

The otherwise perspicacious intellectual Avi(ezer) Ravitzky, for whom I have great respect, wrote that ‘Modern Greek, for example, boasts many similarities to its ancestor, yet a speaker of the current language must struggle to read ancient texts. The modern Hebrew speaker, however, moves smoothly through the Bible’ (2000: 13-14). Leaving aside the crucial difference between the *evolution* of Classical into Modern Greek and the qualitatively-unparalleled Israeli *genesis* (rather than evolution), the alleged smoothness is a mere myth. Israelis might understand the most general meaning of ‘bereshit- bara ’elohim ’et hashamayim we’et ha’arets’ (Genesis 1:1: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth) but very few would be able to explain the construct-state *nomen regens* (nismákh) *bereshit-*: in the beginning of what? And how many Israelis could fathom this sentence from the perspective of the temporal sequence of creation: were the heaven and the earth created at the same time? Is it, therefore, possible that the expression ‘the heaven and the earth’ here refers to ‘the world’ in general? And which Israeli-speaker uses a Verb-Subject-Object constituent-order as in ‘created God the heaven and the earth’? Ask Israelis what ‘*avaním shaaqú máyim*’ (Job 14:19) means and they will tell you that the stones eroded the water. On second thought, they might guess that semantically it would make more sense that the water eroded the stones. Yet such an Object-Verb-Subject constituent-order is ungrammatical in Israeli (see Zuckermann 2008, 2009).

How many Israelis can really fathom ‘tohu wavohu’ or ‘tehom’ (Genesis 1:2), the Israeli misleading senses being ‘mess’ and ‘abyss’ respectively? Or ‘*hašvi yisra’el ’al bamotekha alal*’ (II Samuel 1:19: The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places)? Most Israelis understand ‘*yéled sha’ashu’ím*’ (Jeremiah 31:19, King James 20) as ‘playboy’ rather than ‘pleasant child’. ‘*Bá’u baním ’ad mashbér*’ (Isaiah 37:3) is interpreted by Israelis as ‘children arrived at a crisis’ rather than as ‘children arrived at the mouth of the womb, to be born’. ‘*Adam le’amal yullad*’ (Job 5:7) is taken to mean ‘man was born to do productive work’ rather than ‘mischief’ or ‘trouble’ – this sentence stands as an accusation of the inherent wickedness of mankind.

Since I am writing this essay from Bris bane (haBesorim) – cf. ‘covenant between (the parts)’ (Genesis 15) – let me provide an example from Genesis 15:9: Who knows what ‘*egla meshulleshet*’ is?: a triangular heifer? three calves? a third heifer? a cow weighing three weight units? a three-legged heifer? ... If you studied the RAM Bible, you would know because its translation into Israeli is as *egla bat shalosh* (‘an heifer of three years old’, see also the King James Version, which is,

obiter dictum, often more accessible to Israelis than the Hebrew Bible itself). And I have been rebuked being told so many times the red herring that if we correct Israelis' alleged 'grammatical mistakes', they would be more likely to understand Classical Hebrew. Does an Israeli saying 'asará shkalím' (10 shekels), championed by the Academy of the Hebrew Language, have more chances to understand "egla meshulleshet" than if he sticks to the actually more commonly grammatical 'éser shékel'? Just as the 'Jerusalem artichoke' has to do with neither Jerusalem nor artichoke (even though some Jerusalem restaurants take pride in serving it), what left-wing politician Yossi Sarid – to mention but one linguistic right-winger – calls 'mistaken Hebrew' is neither mistaken nor Hebrew: it is grammatical Israeli!

Obviously, one could give thousands of other examples, and from post-Biblical Hebrew too: for instance, how many Israelis can follow the meaning of the Passover Haggadah or the Hanukkah hymn 'Ma'oz Tsur Yeshu'ati'? Is Hebrew *menabea* 'blaspheming' indeed related, after all, to Israeli *novéakh* 'barking'?

Most importantly, however, the available examples are far from being only lexical: Israelis are incapable of recognizing moods and aspects in the Bible. For example, 'nappíla gorálót wened'á' (Jonah 1:7) was thought by some Israelis I have examined to be rhetorical future rather than cohortative, the latter apparent, for example, in Israeli 'yeushár hataktív!' (may the budget be approved!).

Despite eleven years of Biblical training, Israeli-speakers still understand the perfect aspect (e.g. 'amar 'said' as in 'I will have said...') as if it were past tense. The imperfect aspect (e.g. yomar 'would/will say' as in 'I thought I would say...') is misunderstood to be the future tense. In reality, a Biblical verb in the perfect aspect – which Israelis take to be past tense – can refer to a completed action in the future – cf., mutatis mutandis, the Israeli colloquial question 'záznu?' (literally, 'have we gone/moved?'), utterable instead of 'yala bay', i.e. 'let's go'. I remember my tironút (IDF basic training) commander ordering us in a *sadaút* session ('fieldcraft', etymologically unrelated to *sadism*): 'od khamésh dakót hayítem kan!' (Within five minutes you will have been here), *hayítem* being in Israeli grammatically past but actually referring in this specific colloquial case to an action in the future. In the Bible, *heyítem* refers *regularly* – not only colloquially – to an action that has been completed, regardless of whether or not it is in the past or future – hence the term 'aspect' rather than 'tense'. Such Biblical mindset is in harsh contradistinction to the Weltanschauung of the '*Homo sapiens sapiens israelicus vulgaris*', the one who knows s/he knows, and to the way Israelis read the Bible.

Negating the Diaspora, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda would have been most content had Israelis spoken Biblical Hebrew. Had the Hebrew revival been fully successful, we would indeed have spoken a language closer to ancient Hebrew than Modern English is to Chaucer because we would have bypassed more than 1,750 years of natural development. On the other hand, let us assume for a moment that Hebrew had never died as a spoken language by the second century CE and it continued to be the mother tongue of generations of Jews. They eventually returned to the Holy Land, continuing to speak Hebrew. It might *well* be the case that *that* Hebrew would have differed more from Biblical Hebrew than does Israeli, but this fact says nothing about the genetics of actual Israeli.

Given such a magnificent hybridic *yíkhes* (heritage), as well as the omnipresent misunderstandings of the Hebrew Bible by lovely Israelis, Ahuvia's translation should be cherished and embraced – rather than chastised – by the establishment. Israel's Education Ministry should revise

the way it teaches the Bible and treat it as foreign language classes – just like Latin, employing the most advanced alternative applied linguistics methods of second language teaching, which can be most joyful and memorable. Such a measure has the potential of reducing Israeli pupils' disdain for Bible lessons, as well as of attracting more secular Jews to Biblical scholarship. In fact, established and accomplished Biblical scholars would benefit from such a move immensely.

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As if the picture were not complex enough, further misunderstandings of the Bible originate from the ideological secularization of Hebrew terms in the service of Zionism, by and large a secular movement. Yadin and Zuckermann (2010) demonstrate the success of Zionism in deifying the Israeli State by shrewdly employing divine Hebrew terms and turning them into signifiers for nationalist referents. For example, Biblical Hebrew *mishkân* meant both 'dwelling-place' and 'Tabernacle of the Congregation' (where Moses kept the Ark in the wilderness) and 'inner sanctum' (known as *'ohel mo'ed*). Israeli *mishkân haknéset*, however, refers to 'the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) building.' Translating *mishkân haknéset* as 'The Knesset Building' (as on the official Knesset website) is lacking. The word *mishkân* is loaded with holiness and evokes sanctity (cf. *sanctuary*), as if Members of Knesset (cf. MPs) were, at the very least, angels or seraphim.

Another example, not mentioned by Yadin and Zuckermann, is *mékhes*: Whereas in the Hebrew Bible *mékhes* was a tribute to God (e.g. Numbers 31:37), in Israeli it is 'customs' paid to the State.

Biblical Hebrew *millu'im* refers to 'the days following the dedication of the Tabernacle but prior to the priests' inauguration' – see Leviticus 8:33:

You shall not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting for seven days,
until the day that your period of ordination *millu'im* is completed'

The term also appears as modifying the sacrifices offered as part of the inauguration ritual: 'the ram of ordination *millu'im*' (Leviticus 8:22) and 'the bread that is in the basket of ordination' (Leviticus 8:31).

The precise meaning of *millu'im* in this context is a matter of controversy among Bible scholars, but the root *m.l.*' means 'fill' and it is this meaning that generates the Israeli appropriation of the word to refer to 'supplemental / reserve military service'. Thus, one's days of *milu'im* are no longer served at the Tabernacle but in reserve duty.

Mishkân, *mékhes* and *millu'im* are but three examples of secularization manifested as superseding / supersession. For example, priestly service gives way to reserve duty (*milu'im*). Though the modern concepts replace the ancient, they do so as heirs that are still somehow anchored in the Old Testament, or at least as 'natural' or 'organic' outgrowths of earlier Jewish strata. This sense of a natural – almost inevitable – development is itself an expression of the ideological hegemony of Zionism. It is certainly true that the ultra-orthodox community has waged a fierce polemic against these semantic innovations (cf. Be'er 2003). But for Israeli speakers the radical

nature of the semantic change is no longer visible. The new meanings do not represent an antagonistic or revolutionary break with their ancient predecessors. The potentially problematic return to the religious strata of Hebrew is overcome by assimilating the pre-modern meanings into Israeli, subsuming the earlier under the later. The State is the new God!

An example of defying religion is *belorít*. Mishnaic Hebrew *belorít* is ‘Mohawk, an upright strip of hair that runs across the crown of the head from the forehead to the nape of the neck’, characteristic of the abominable pagan and not to be touched by the Jewish barber. But defying religious values, secular Socialist Zionists use *blorít* with the meaning ‘forelock, hair above the forehead’, which becomes one of the defining characteristics of the Sabra (‘prickly pear’, a nickname for native Israelis, allegedly thorny on the outside and sweet inside). Is the ‘new Jew’ ultimately a pagan?

This negation of religion fascinatingly adds to the phenomenon of negation of the Diaspora (*shlilat hagolá*), exemplified in the *blorít* itself by Zionists expecting the Sabra to have dishevelled hair, as opposed to the orderly diasporic Jew, who was considered by Zionists to be weak and persecuted.

Biblical Hebrew ‘*ámâl* is generally negative. Jeremiah (20:18) asks ‘Why did I ever issue from the womb, to see misery ‘*ámâl* and woe’. The Psalmist asserts that, though the wicked man thinks God is oblivious to what happens in the world, ‘You do look! You take note of mischief ‘*ámâl* and vexation!’ (Psalms 10:14). Habakkuk (1:13) speaks of God as one ‘whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil, who cannot countenance wrongdoing ‘*ámâl*’. There are a number of verses – albeit strikingly few – in which the word appears to mean ‘hard work, labour’, but here too the meaning is consistently negative. Consider Ecclesiastes 2:11:

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

In Mishnaic Hebrew, the narrower sense of ‘labour’ becomes more pronounced, as in the following statement from Mishnah Avot 2.14:

Rabbi Elazar says: be diligent in the study of Torah and know the proper response to a heretic (epikoros), and know before whom you labour ‘*ámel*, and the supervisor is reliable – he will pay you the wages of your actions.

Here too, however, the sense is largely negative: ‘*ámâl* is regularly paired with *yega* ‘exertion, tiring toil’. Man is sentenced to ‘*ámâl* and can only redeem this state of affairs by labouring in Torah.

Socialist Zionism, however, strips the term of its negative connotations, and it comes to mean ‘productive work, labour’, often in an unambiguously positive sense as in the following toponyms: *tel amál* was the name of a kibbutz (the first of the so-called *khomá umigdál* settlements), established in 1936, today called Nir David; *nevé amál* is a neighborhood in Herzeliyah; *kiryát amál* is a settlement near Tiv‘on. Arabic, where ‘*.m.l* means ‘to work’, might have facilitated this semantic choice in Israeli.

Amál is also the name of a national network of technical and vocational schools. In the reflexive form, *amál* is something that people can and should impose on themselves for their health and well-being; *bitamlút* means ‘physical exercise’.

The shift in meaning is particularly marked in the appropriation of the phrase *’ādām le’āmāl yullād* ‘Man was born into (or: to do) *’āmāl*’. In the book of Job (5:6-7), this sentence stands as an accusation of the inherent wickedness of mankind:

Evil does not grow out of the soil
Nor does mischief spring from the ground
For man was born to do mischief *’āmāl*.

The negative force of *’āmāl* is clear from the parallel with *’āwEn* ‘evil’, so the statement – which is made by Elifaz the Temanite, not Job – stands as a pessimistic assessment of the human condition.

But in the language of Socialist Zionism, this very phrase is employed as affirmation that humanity finds its fulfilment in labour. Turning the semantic, etymological truth upside down, an Israeli who reads Job 5:7 is very likely to understand it as ‘man was born to do productive work’.

Finally, in line with the prediction made by the Kabbalah-scholar Gershom Scholem in a letter to Franz Rosenzweig (*Bekennntnis über unsere Sprache*, 1926), some ultra-orthodox Jews have tried to launch a ‘lexical vendetta’: using secularized Biblical – as well as Mishnaic and Kabbalistic – terms like ‘dormant agents’, as a shortcut to religious concepts, thus trying to convince secular Jews to go back to their religious roots (cf. Walzer 1965 and Ravitzky 1993).

The study of Israeli cultural linguistics and socio-philology casts light on the dynamics between language, religion and identity in a land where fierce military battles with external enemies are accompanied by internal *Kulturkämpfe*.

The bottom line is that Israelis misunderstand the Hebrew Bible.

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