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# Let my people know!: towards a revolution in the teaching of the Hebrew Bible

**Abstract:** Acquiring knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and comprehension of the language are major aims of the Israeli education system. Yet for most students, it fails on both counts. This article proposes that these failures are closely connected: both are rooted in an erroneous linkage between Biblical Hebrew and the language spoken in modern Israel. Modern Hebrew – or more appropriately: “Israeli” – is a hybrid of Hebrew, Yiddish and other languages. Its grammar is distinct from that of Hebrew, and it has been the mother tongue of most Israeli-born Jews for about a hundred years.

There is a fundamental difference between the acquisition and usage of mother tongues and those of any other language. Since Biblical Hebrew is a foreign language for modern Israelis, it ought to be taught as such. Israeli should be acknowledged as a legitimate, distinct tongue.

**Keywords:** Israeli, Hebrew, Bible, Old Testament, translation

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“The Bible is the closest book to Israeli youth”  
(David Ben-Gurion, 1957)<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Bible teaching in Israel – an anatomy of failure

“I neither know nor think that I know” (Plato, *Apology*). Using this simple phrase, Socrates explained why the Pythian prophetess of Delphi had asserted that he and none other was the wisest man of all. He reached his conclusion having

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1 “אין ספר כל כך קרוב לנוער בארץ – כספר התנ”ך.”

A quote from a letter by David Ben-Gurion to Professor Nathan Rotenstreich, 28 March 1957, see Shapira (2005: 133).

wandered all round Athens, talking to its famous sages, its politicians, poets and artisans. He realized that all these different groups shared the same flaw, namely, their proficiency in their own fields made them believe they were just as brilliant in every subject and topic. Socrates explained that “this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom”, so he preferred being as he was, “neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance”. His philosophical investigations aimed to clarifying his interlocutors’ moral views. Typically these inquiries would come to an end once Socrates had established that the other’s definitions of fundamental values such as “justice” and “virtue” were unsatisfactory. He did not provide any definitive answers, but he did stimulate his students to re-examine their concepts. Building on Socrates’ skepticism, Plato succeeded in constructing a most influential metaphysical philosophy. As Alfred North Whitehead, the twentieth-century philosopher, put it, European philosophy “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (1979: 39). Therefore, we too may ponder what else could be deduced from the teachings of that wisest Athenian. The question to be posed would be whether Socrates’ critical views apply to the examination of prevailing conventions whose true validity has not been questioned for too long a time.

As Nietzsche once said:

*Alle Dinge, die lange leben, werden allmählich so mit Vernunft durchtränkt, dass ihre Abkunft aus der Unvernunft dadurch unwahrscheinlich wird. Klingt nicht fast jede genaue Geschichte einer Entstehung für das Gefühl paradox und frevelhaft?* (Nietzsche 1881: Book I, Section 1)

[Whatever lives for a long time is gradually so saturated with reason, that its irrational origins become improbable. Does not almost every accurate history of the origin of something sound paradoxical and sacrilegious to our feelings?]

The present study explores the methods used in teaching the Bible and Hebrew at Israeli schools. More specifically, it seeks to explain the ongoing failure of these methods. Indubitably, the huge resources invested in teaching the Bible and Hebrew are squandered. Israeli media endlessly discuss the so-called “poor Hebrew language” spoken by Israeli youth, and new programs are frequently designed in order to root out that allegedly poor use of language. Simultaneously, Bible studies are undergoing an unprecedented crisis. Zvi Zameret, head of the Pedagogical Council of the Israeli Ministry of Education until July 2011, was recently quoted as saying: “The Bible teaching situation is deteriorating alarmingly” (Kashti 2011). Zameret added that the current situation amounted to “an elimination of the Bible and Bible teachers” (2011). He argued that the Ministry of Finance was to blame, claiming that its officials were responsible for cutting the number of hours allotted to studying the Bible, thus sabotaging efforts to teach and learn it properly.

It might very well be that allocation of additional hours to Bible classes would alleviate the decline in Biblical knowledge among Israeli students and perhaps even improve their *Bagrút* (matriculation/baccalaureate) grades. However, it is highly unlikely that teaching extra Bible classes using current methods would reduce the alienation which the majority of young people feel towards this classical treatise. It is also unrealistic to expect that additional Bible classes would help to make Israel's Biblical heritage a meaningful part of the culture appreciated by Israeli youth. Moreover, one should not ignore the fact that, despite some reduction in the time devoted to Bible lessons, this subject has always been and still is one of the main subjects taught in the Israeli education system. A typical Israeli pupil begins to study the Hebrew Bible in the second year of primary school, and this becomes an important part of the curriculum till high school graduation. Given that such huge resources of time and money are invested in Bible teaching, on the part of the state, the devoted teachers as well as the students, we must vehemently ask: Why does this important subject suffer from such low prestige, and what might be the mechanisms to mend this grim state of affairs?

## 2 Biblical Hebrew and the Israeli language

We maintain that there is a substantial connection between understanding – or rather not understanding or misunderstanding – the Hebrew language, and the low point reached by Bible Studies today. Bible teaching in Israel relies on the premise that the ancient Biblical language and the mother tongue of most Israelis is one and the same. Almost all relevant linguistic studies aim to substantiate this thesis. Analysis shows that this theory is manifested in two ways:

- A. On the one hand, some studies celebrate the “resurrection of Hebrew”, which they presume to have occurred at the beginning of the 20th century. They praise the pioneering and important enterprise of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, which is generally described as a heroic miracle that brought about the revival of Hebrew speech. In this context, the language spoken in modern Israel is perceived to be the language of the Bible resurrected from the dead, much like the dry bones that Ezekiel saw in his vision, or the famous Sleeping Beauty, awakening from 1,750 years of sleep.
- B. On the other hand, different studies tackle that alleged miracle by presenting an alternative theory. This theory holds that “the revival of Hebrew” did not take place at all: Hebrew had not died, but rather maintained its consecutive existence from the Biblical period onwards until the modern era.

We shall discuss these theories and explain the shortcomings inherent in each one of them. We shall further explicate the true nature of the connection between Biblical language and contemporary Israeli. First and foremost, it should be noted that, while both theories identify a unique affinity between Biblical Hebrew and contemporary Israeli, they are otherwise mutually exclusive.

According to the first theory, Hebrew never existed as a living language during the 1,750 years of exile. That is why the ages that have passed since it was last used did not leave their mark on it, leaving it in its pristine condition, a worthy candidate for resurrection.

According to the second theory, Hebrew never ceased to function as a living language. From this point of view, Ben-Yehuda's labor is perceived as but one link in a grand chain consisting of many activists, who cultivated the Hebrew language throughout the generations. Hebrew was for them the apple of their eye, and thus it was kept intact, unharmed and undesecrated, although it was practiced in a variety of cultural and linguistic scenes.

There is some truth in both of these theories. However, each ignores important facts that contradict its main thesis. Moreover, it is intriguing that different scholars using different methods should all draw the same conclusion: that there is an essential link between modern-day Israeli and Biblical Hebrew. This would seem to suggest an ideological motive, a common desire to erase the cultural and linguistic significance of the 1,750 years between the second century CE and the 20th century.

Therefore, it becomes essential to offer a different approach to fathoming the modern Israeli language and to explaining its nature. This approach should be scientific, unbiased and uncontaminated by any sort of ideology. The new theory would take into consideration useful elements presented by the above-mentioned theories, but would not repeat their mistake of dismissing significant linguistic phenomena.

Haiim B. Rosén, Ze'ev Ben-Haim and Chaim Rabin are three of the most prominent scholars who advocate that Modern Hebrew is in fact Biblical Hebrew awakened from the dead. Linguist Haiim B. Rosén (1956) defined the language spoken in Israel nowadays as an "Israeli Hebrew" (1956: 35). This phrase expresses his view that the modern language differs from that of previous epochs. However, its main elements have existed in centuries past: "The name 'Israeli Hebrew' implies that our language is not merely a new continuation of the ancient language, but rather a renewed language in light of antique setting" (1956: 107).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> השם 'עברית ישראלית' בא לרמוז, שלשוננו זו אינה המשך חדש גרידא של הלשון העתיקה, אלא לשון מחודשת על רקע עתיק."

Rosén's most important book, *Our Hebrew*, opens with the following statement: "Our Hebrew is a Semitic language" (1956: 1).<sup>3</sup> This decisive statement determines the boundaries of his discourse, and stakes his claim that the Hebrew tongues of various periods are fundamentally the same language. The major innovation of his view lies in the fact that it acknowledges that "Israeli Hebrew" does not necessarily express the full range of linguistic phenomena that existed in the past. Rosén indicated that Israeli Hebrew did not develop organically from previous languages. Therefore "it is as if many phases marking the development of the Hebrew language do not exist with regard to the form of Hebrew" (1956: 33).<sup>4</sup> He held that in other languages every linguistic phase is "an organic and living outcome from previous stages according to their historical order" (1956: 33).<sup>5</sup> Since Israeli Hebrew evolved in a unique manner, it does not necessarily reflect previous phases and it does not always echo phenomena typically found in the Hebrew of past generations. Rosén explained that occasionally Israeli Hebrew drew some elements directly from ancient linguistic stages, but that it was also affected by foreign tongues, specifically English, German, French and Arabic. He argued furthermore that Israeli Hebrew also reflects a "spontaneous process of innovation, typical of the civilization in which it is spoken" (1956: 36).<sup>6</sup> Despite the originality of his findings, Rosén still expressed a traditional view: "Biblical Hebrew . . . provided us with the core and essence of our language" (1956: 37).<sup>7</sup>

Rosén contributed Hebrew encyclopedia entries about the Hebrew Language, having composed the section entitled "Contemporary Hebrew Language" (Rosén 1974). He warned against putting too much emphasis on the innovations that characterize Israeli Hebrew. For instance, he noted that "some attribute excessive weight to new words and terms, seeing them as characteristic signs of a contemporary language" (1974: 661).<sup>8</sup> He added that "genealogically speaking, Israeli Hebrew is at the same place as 'classical' Hebrew . . . that is, being one of the Semitic languages" (1974: 661).<sup>9</sup> He admitted that in terms of typology, that is "in the organized application of means of expression" (1974: 661), Israeli Hebrew belongs to "Contemporary Western civilization", but he stressed that "it should not be

3 "הלשון העברית שלנו היא לשון שמית".<sup>3</sup>

4 "שלבים רבים בהתפתחות הלשון העברית כאילו אינם קיימים לגבי צורתה של העברית".<sup>4</sup>

5 "תוצאה אורגאנית וחיה מהשלבים הקודמים לפי סדר עקיבתם ההיסטורית" (שם, שם).<sup>5</sup>

6 "תהליכי החידוש הספונטאניים שבפי החברה הדוברת" (שם, עמ' 36).<sup>6</sup>

7 "העברית המקראית . . . סיפקה לנו את גזעה ועיקרה של לשוננו . . ." (שם, עמ' 37).<sup>7</sup>

8 "יש המייחסים משקל מוגזם לחידושי מילים ומונחים כסימן האפייני ללשון-ימינו".<sup>8</sup>

9 "מבחינה גנאולוגית מצויה העברית הישראלית באותו מקום כעברית 'הקלאסית' . . . כלומר במסגרת השפות השמיות" (שם).<sup>9</sup>

referred to as Indo-European, since that would be a genealogical assertion” (1974: 661).<sup>10</sup>

Ze'ev Ben-Haim (1992) discussed the historical unity of the Hebrew language, explaining that this topic was repeatedly considered throughout the ages (1992: 5–14). Despite his thorough presentation of the claims and queries raised against the notion that Hebrew has not changed over the centuries, he concluded that “the fact that the question is being raised time and again, indicates that the sense of historical identity of Hebrew has indeed prevailed” (1992: 14).<sup>11</sup> Ben-Haim admitted that arguments in favor of the historical unity of Hebrew were motivated by the will to acknowledge the “continuity of literary heritage throughout the ages” (1992: 15).<sup>12</sup> Thus, it seems that linguistics is blatantly recruited in order to demonstrate the ties between different layers of Jewish culture.

Ben-Haim continued to examine Hebrew's historical character from a linguistic perspective. His conclusion was that in terms of both vocabulary and morphology, Biblical Hebrew had functioned as the nucleus of Hebrew in different generations. As to vocabulary, his position was that, although Hebrew had picked words “from foreign sources in every generation” (1992: 17),<sup>13</sup> Biblical vocabulary was still its basic layer. He argued, however, that the determining factor in “maintaining the historical unity of the language” (1992: 17)<sup>14</sup> is morphology, which is “rigid in all of its parts and hermetically sealed” (1992: 17).<sup>15</sup> Ben-Haim concluded that “the contemporary spoken language uses the same basic words and basic grammatical forms that were common many generations ago; in fact *there are no others in their place*” (1992: 23, emphasis in original).<sup>16</sup>

As explained above, Ben-Haim stated that linguistics could be exploited in order to prove the connection between different layers of Jewish culture. But to the best of our understanding, careful scrutiny of this culture proves the durable bond between these layers. By and large, important intellectuals and leading spiritual figures have always manifested a meaningful affinity to Jewish literature of past generations. Therefore there is no need to assert the “unity the Hebrew tongue” in order to prove continuity of literary heritage.

<sup>10</sup> “בתחום יישומם המאורגן של אמצעי ההבעה” (שם), שייכת העברית הישראלית “לציוויליזציה המערבית בת-מינו”, אולם הדגיש כי “אין לציין את טיפוסה כ'הודו-אירופי' שכן זו קביעה גנאולוגית” (שם).

<sup>11</sup> “עצם הדבר שהשאלה עולה, חוזרת ועולה במרוצת הימים, מעידה כי אכן לא בטלה תחושת הזהות ההיסטורית של העברית” (שם, עמ' 14).

<sup>12</sup> “רציפות המורשת הספרותית לדורותיה” (שם, עמ' 15).

<sup>13</sup> “ממקורות חוץ בכל דור ודור” (שם, עמ' 17).

<sup>14</sup> “בקיום האחדות ההיסטורית של הלשון”.

<sup>15</sup> “קשוחה בכל חלקיה ואטומה לחלוטין בפעל” (שם, עמ' 17).

<sup>16</sup> “המילים הבסיסיות והצורות הדקדוקיות הבסיסיות נוהגות כיום במדוברת כפי שנהגו לפני דורות הרבה; למעשה אין אחרות במקומן” (שם, עמ' 23. ההדגשה במקור).

Chaim Rabin (1999) advocated a more complex theory regarding the relationship between contemporary Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew. Rabin determined that we ought to distinguish between “linguistic language” and “social language”.<sup>17</sup> He explained that, grammatically speaking, Biblical language, Mishnaic language, the language of medieval Ashkenazi Jews, the language of medieval Jewish philosophers, “and according to many scholars – also the contemporary language” (1999: 361)<sup>18</sup> – each has a unique character, and each one deserves a unique linguistic account. However, he stated that “all Hebrew speakers would not hesitate to include all those within the concept of “Hebrew” (1999: 361).<sup>19</sup> On what grounds did he found this statement? Apparently, that proficient linguist recoiled from the conclusions drawn from his own research, as well as from his colleagues’ studies. It might very well be that he was not ready to face the fact that the medieval philosophical tongue, for example, used by Jewish translators and philosophers, was related to Arabic as much as to Biblical Hebrew. The same goes for other Hebrew dialects used in different venues, namely they were next of kin to their contemporaneous tongues as much as they were to Biblical Hebrew. Rabin wrote that, although scientific linguistic analysis proved that Hebrew-rooted tongues differ significantly, the “linguist actually follows the terminology of social language. While describing periods or dialects separately, he names them ‘Hebrew Language of the time XYZ’” (1999: 361).<sup>20</sup> He did not disapprove of this kind of terminology even though the above-mentioned assertion contradicts the findings of linguistic research. Rabin had typically underestimated reciprocal influence between languages: “The fact that some changes occur as a result of the influence of another language cannot be denied. However, these phenomena should not be overestimated, as sometimes happens with regard to Hebrew” (1999: 369).<sup>21</sup>

When Rabin did acknowledge it, he claimed it was for the most part a social phenomenon which acquired a linguistic expression: “It was not the language that has changed but rather the populace has changed, and the new people have changed the language” (1999: 369).<sup>22</sup> It is easy to notice that the end of this sentence contradicts its beginning. Denying the importance of reciprocal influence

17 “לשון בלשנית”, “לשון חברתית” (שם, עמ' 360).

18 “ולפי חוקרים רבים – אף ללשון ימינו” (עמ' 361).

19 “כל דובר עברית לא יהסס לכלול את כל אלה בתוך המושג ‘עברית’” (שם, עמ' 361).

20 “הבלשן נגרר למעשה אחרי המינוח של הלשון החברתית. כשהוא בא לתאר תקופות או להגים בנפרד, הוא קורא להם ‘לשון עברית של תקופה פלונית’” (שם).

21 “כן אין לשלול את העובדה ששינויים מסוימים באים בהשפעת לשון אחרת, אף על פי שאין להגים בדבר זה, כפי שעושים לעתים ביחס לעברית” (שם, עמ' 369).

22 “לא הלשון השתנתה אלא החברה השתנתה, והאנשים החדשים שינו את הלשון” (שם, עמ' 369).

between languages thus served Rabin's inclination to underestimate the influence of foreign languages over Hebrew. Of course he did not acknowledge that Israeli is a hybrid language by nature rather than Hebrew affected by Yiddish. Rabin dismissed his own linguistic expertise while yielding to popular views and maintaining that "what determines the unity of Hebrew is the continuity of the civilization using that language all through different periods" (1999: 361).<sup>23</sup> Although Rabin recognized the significant differences between the languages that were in use at various times, he held that they ought to be perceived as one because they were all used by the same people. This position is hard to fathom since it is widely known that, for the most part, the people of Israel were "scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples" (Esther 8: 3).

Significant religious principles and considerable historical recollections have established mutual affinity between various Diasporic communities. Nonetheless, one must not underestimate the extent of the linguistic and cultural diversity that has evolved in Jewish communities scattered all over the globe.

Reviewing our findings so far, we could determine that whereas Ben-Haim exploited the alleged uniformity of the Hebrew language in order to establish the continuity of Jewish tradition, Rabin recruited the supposed unity of the people of Israel to prove the continuity of the tongue. However, it seems that, much like military recruitment, this employment blurs the essential differences in the data which it seeks to analyse.

Rabin discussed the relationship between post-resurrection Hebrew ("revived language") and the language that was the object of reviving ("language of the ancient texts") (Rabin 1999: 374).<sup>24</sup> He concluded that these two languages were similar to each other "due to common genetic origin" but they were not equivalent (1999: 375).<sup>25</sup> Rabin preferred the conventional approach, explaining that "despite the structural separation between the 'revived language' and the language of the ancient texts, socially speaking there is a psychological connection between the two. The people want to believe that they still use the original ancient language" (1999: 376).<sup>26</sup> Rabin openly admitted that he had feared that the bond between the people and their tongue would grow weaker once they realise they were not using the original Biblical language. This approach seems to respect popular concepts, but is actually motivated by arrogance, reflecting a lack of confidence in the general public's ability to absorb complex theories. At

<sup>23</sup> "מה שקובע את אחדות העברית הוא המשכיות החברה המשתמשת בלשון התקופות השונות" (שם, עמ' 361).  
<sup>24</sup> "הלשון המוחיית" ו"לשון המקורות".

<sup>25</sup> "יש דמיון הנובע מן המוצא הגנטי המשותף, אך אין תואם" (שם, עמ' 375).

<sup>26</sup> "על אף הניתוק המבני בין הלשון המוחיית ולשון המקורות קיימת העובדה החברתית של קשר פסיכולוגי ביניהן.  
 הקהל רוצה להאמין שהוא ממשיך לדבר בלשון המקורות" (שם, עמ' 376).



the same time, it puts the general population, and particularly young people, in the wrong, as scholars are forced to acknowledge the reality of language change: that there is a profound and widening chasm between colloquial and Biblical language.

Shlomo Haramati is a prominent spokesman for the view that Hebrew never ceased to function as a living language but was rather used incessantly. Haramati composed several fascinating books, collecting countless examples demonstrating the survival of Hebrew throughout the ages. He gathered evidence indicating that Jewish pedagogical institutions were using Hebrew in order to teach classes, and proved that lectures, speeches and sermons were given in Hebrew for centuries. Haramati also confronted the thesis maintaining that Hebrew was not spoken during the long years of exile, by reporting documented cases of spoken Hebrew from the second century until the nineteenth century. Haramati's (2000) book *Hebrew – A Spoken Language* illustrates these phenomena extensively. The unequivocal rationale of this book is to attack the “myth of Ben-Yehuda”, i.e. to undermine the thesis that “Hebrew has died and therefore Ben-Yehuda was compelled to revive it” (2000: 8).<sup>27</sup> Haramati (1997) had reservations regarding the titles associated with Ben-Yehuda, such as “the reviver of Hebrew speech” and “founding father of Modern Hebrew” (1997: 90).<sup>28</sup> He did not discuss the manner in which Hebrew has evolved throughout the ages. Yet his research implies that the emergence of spoken Hebrew at the early twentieth century was merely a continual and harmonious process, which took place among the various Diaspora Jewish communities over a period of many centuries.

At this stage it should be pointed out that Haramati's erudite studies ignore an elementary fact of crucial importance. Despite all the examples of speeches, sermons and conversations conducted in Hebrew, there is no evidence that Hebrew was the mother tongue of any of the people using it. Haramati's studies indicate at most the existence of numerous scholars, whose skill and diligence enabled them to employ the language of the Holy Scriptures studied thoroughly at the *Yeshiva*, and to use it effectively for the purposes of teaching, discussion, or negotiation. There is no evidence that any of them spoke Hebrew at home, as a mother tongue. In fact, Haramati's meticulous studies attest ultimately that while in exile, Hebrew was used only in masculine, public and scholarly settings. It was the *lingua franca* of the Jewish world but it was not a living language, sufficient to account for the birth of spoken Hebrew in the early twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Chaim

<sup>27</sup> “מתה העברית ולכן היה אבי צריך להחיות אותה” (שם, עמ' 8).

<sup>28</sup> “מחייה הלשון העברית בדיבור” ו”אבי העברית המודרנית” (שם, עמ' 90).

<sup>29</sup> On Hebrew as *lingua franca*, see Zuckermann (2006: 57; 2009: 42). On Hebrew as a non mother tongue, see Zuckermann (2006: 62, 65; 2009: 45–46) and Zuckermann and Walsh (2011).

Rabin has already determined that since the cessation of Hebrew speech, “Hebrew was a natural candidate for use as a Jewish lingua franca in time of need” (1975: 229).<sup>30</sup> He discussed in detail the languages that were spoken by the Jewish community in *Eretz Israel* during the nineteenth century, explaining that this community was “a microcosm of the Diaspora Jewish world” (1975: 230).<sup>31</sup> He argued further that since the colloquial languages of the Jewish community were many and varied, “Jews developed the use of ancient Hebrew as a lingua franca” (1975: 230).<sup>32</sup> However, he underlined the fact that “none of the families spoke Hebrew at home, no one had spoken Hebrew in meetings that took place within the same ethnic group” (1975: 230).<sup>33</sup> Rabin (1999) appended that although Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was aware that Hebrew was indeed spoken in Israel it “did not deter him from describing Hebrew as ‘dead’”, thus “Ben-Yehuda demonstrated a healthy socio-linguistic sense” (1999: 364).<sup>34</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar gave a correct, albeit somewhat general description, of the relation between Hebrew as it was spoken until the twentieth century and the modern language as “the process of transforming a lingua franca that was already established as a written language, into a spoken ‘natural’ language by birth (‘mother tongue’) of a new generation” (Kasher 1980: 118).<sup>35</sup>

### 3 The Israeli language

An important rule in the secret of linguistic creativity: the quantity is of minor importance; the manner in which language is composed has a major value. (Haim Nachman Bialik, *Chevei Lashon*, 1933: 293)

The present article does not presume to encompass all relevant linguistic research (see, e.g. Zuckermann [2006, 2008, 2009, 2011] for that). However, we have presented its main ideas in a nutshell. The conclusions summarized above had far-reaching consequences. They affected public opinion as well as scholarship, encouraging an erroneous equation between the language of the Bible and the

<sup>30</sup> “הייתה העברית מועמדת טבעית לשימוש בלינגוה פראנקה בין-יהודית לעת הצורך” (תשל”ה, עמ’ 229).

<sup>31</sup> “מיקרוקוסמוס של העולם היהודי הגלותי” (שם, עמ’ 230).

<sup>32</sup> “פיתחו יהודי הערים הללו את השימוש בלינגוה פראנקה העברית עתיקת הזמין” (שם, שם).

<sup>33</sup> “לא היתה משפחה שדיברה עברית בבית, לא דיברו עברית במפגשים שבתוך עדה” (שם, שם).

<sup>34</sup> “לא הניאה אותו ידיעה זו מלכנות את העברית ‘מתה’ – ובכך ‘הראה בן-יהודה חוש סוציולוגינגוויסטי בריא’” (שם, עמ’ 364).

<sup>35</sup> “ההליך של הפיכת לינגוה פראנקה אחרי שכבר נקבעה כלשון כתב, ללשון דיבור טבעית מלידה (‘לשון אם’)” (כשר ואחרים, תש”ס, עמ’ 118).

Israeli language. Chaim Rabin (1999) had already admitted that the common view regarding the relation between contemporary language and Biblical Hebrew is “illusory” (1999: 376).<sup>36</sup>

Aviezer Ravitzky, a prominent scholar of Jewish philosophy, compared the relationship between Classical Greek and Modern Greek to the relationship between Biblical and contemporary Hebrew. Ravitzky argued that, whereas Greek is characterized by an unbridgeable gap between these two languages, Hebrew users do not face such a chasm:

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. (Ravitzky 2000: 13–14)

A similar view was expressed in an introduction to a linguistic discussion held some 30 years ago:

If you give an Israeli child a piece of Hebrew-engraved pottery thousands of years old, he would probably read the engraved writing without difficulty and would understand its content to some extent. This remarkable fact is held by many as conclusive evidence testifying to the unique qualities of Hebrew and to the difference between Hebrew and other languages. (Kasher et al. 1980: 107)<sup>37</sup>

We cannot discuss here the multifarious ideas raised by that discourse. Let us, however, refer to an honest and courageous confession by Joseph Klausner (1957). While mourning the death of his mother, Klausner tried to read the Book of Job. He did not hesitate to admit the enormous difficulty that confronted him: “Instead of *reading* the Book of Job, I had to *study* it” (1957: 36, emphasis in original).<sup>38</sup> He found that the only solution was to read it in its French translation. He described his experience as follows: “The *language* was simple and intelligible, so that I could direct my thinking to the *idea*, admire the lofty arguments, and find solace in my grief” (1957: 36, emphasis in original).<sup>39</sup>

The Book of Job is indeed one of the most intricate, as well as the most obscure books of the Bible. Nevertheless, numerous chapters of the Torah, as well

<sup>36</sup> “אשליה בלבד” (שם, עמ' 376).

<sup>37</sup> אם ייתנו לילד ישראלי חרס עברי בן אלפי שנים, יש להניח, שלא יתקשה לקרוא את הכתובת החרוטה עליו ואף להבין, במידה זו או זו, את תוכנה. עובדה מופלאה זו מוחזקת אצל רבים כעדות חותכת לייחודה של השפה העברית בקרב לשונות העמים. (כשר ואחרים, תש”ס, עמ' 107).

<sup>38</sup> “במקום לקרוא את ספר איוב מוכרח הייתי ללמוד אותו” (שם, עמ' 36. ההדגשה במקור).

<sup>39</sup> “מצד הלשון הכל היה כאן פשוט ומוגן, באופן שיכולתי לכוון [כך] את כל מחשבותי אל הרעיון, להתפעל מרוממותם של הויכוחים ולמצוא נוחם בצרה” (שם. ההדגשות במקור).

as chapters of prophecy, include verses that are as difficult to comprehend. The following verses appear in the Torah, in the books of the Prophets and in the Ketuvim. The school curriculum includes the following chapters which, like Job, should be thoroughly studied in order to meet the demands of the Bible *Bagrūt* examination:

“ולא-תחניפו את-האָרץ אשר אתם בה כי הדם הוא יחניף את-האָרץ ולאָרץ לא-יכפר לדם אשר שפד-בה כי-אם (במדבר לה, ג); “וקטר מחמץ תודה וקראו נְדָבוֹת הַשְּׁמִיעוּ כִּי כֹן אֶהְבֶּתֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נָאִם אֲדֹנָי בְּדָם שִׁפְכוּ” (עמוס ד, ה); “והילילו שירות היכל ביום ההוא נאם אֲדֹנָי רַב הַפְּנֵר בְּכָל-מְקוֹם הַשְּׁלִיחַ הַסֵּ” (עמוס ח, ג); “גִּשְׁקֹד על פֶּשְׁעֵי בְּיָדוֹ יִשְׁתַּרְגּוּ עָלוּ עַל-עֲזָאֲרֵי הַכְּשִׁיל כַּחֵי נִתְּנִי אֲדֹנָי בְּיָדִי לֹא-אוּכַל קוּם; סֵלָה כַּל-אַבִּירֵי אֲדֹנָי בְּקִרְבֵי קָרָא עָלַי מוֹעֵד לְשִׁבֵר בַּחוּרֵי גֵת דָּרָד אֲדֹנָי לְבַתּוּלַת בַּת-יְהוּדָה” (איכה א, ד-ט).

Careful scrutiny of these verses reveals that they are unfathomable to the average native Israeli speaker. Benjamin Harshav (1993) discussed Klausner’s statements and drew attention to the fact that even his comprehensive understanding of Hebrew and universal education did not qualify him to understand the Bible:

Professor Dr (as he insisted on signing all his publications) Yosef Klausner, a leading propagandist for the revival of the “Hebrew Tongue” in Russia, editor of the central journal of Hebrew literature, *Ha-Shiloah*, the first ever Professor of Hebrew Literature at the new Hebrew University in Jerusalem, whose mother tongue was Yiddish, whose cultural language was Russian, whose doctorate was in German – this man required a *French* translation of the Hebrew book of Job to console himself for his mother death! (Harshav 1993)

The fact is that Israelis *do not understand* Biblical Hebrew, and most are certainly not its speakers. There has never been a time when the Greek language has not been spoken as a mother tongue. By contrast there is no continuous chain of native speakers connecting Old Hebrew to Israeli Hebrew. Hebrew was no one’s mother tongue for more than 1,700 years. The so-called “revived Hebrew” that came to life at the end of 19th and early 20th centuries cannot be perceived as a direct continuation of the language of the Bible. There must then be a clear-cut distinction between ancient Hebrew and Israeli.

Israeli, which somewhat misleadingly is also known as “Modern Hebrew”, is a fascinating and multifaceted 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, Ladino and Arabic (see Zuckermann 2008: 27). Hebrew persisted as a very important literary, cultural and liturgical language over the centuries and greatly influenced Israeli. The inherent fallacy characteristic of the studies discussed above lies

therefore in their over-emphasis on the Semitic elements of Israeli, namely its core-morphology and very basic vocabulary. These studies overlook the important principle suggested by Bialik and quoted at the beginning of this section. Bialik believed that the essence of a language is determined not only by its “volume”, i.e. vocabulary, but equally by the possible “combinations” of the same words, namely the way they are used. Up-to-date linguistic terminology differentiates in this regard between the *forms* of a language and its *patterns*. Israeli morphological forms and its basic vocabulary are mainly – albeit not exclusively – Semitic. On the other hand, the patterns of the language (phonetics, phonology, syntax, modes of discourse, semantics, associations, connotations) and the spirit of Israeli language are mostly European.

Furthermore, the most important tool in analyzing Israeli is the Congruence Principle: If a linguistic feature exists in more than one contributing language (i.e., there is congruence, or overlapping), it is more likely to persist in the emerging, target language. This is a radical principle since it contradicts the *Stammbaum* ‘family tree’ tool in historical linguistics. According to the family tree, each language has only one parent. But Israeli is a hybrid language, both Semitic and Indo-European. Both Hebrew and Yiddish act as its primary contributors, accompanied by an array of secondary contributors: Arabic, Russian, Polish, German, Judaeo-Spanish (“Ladino”), English and so on. At this point, the Congruence Principle becomes useful. By acknowledging the possibility of overlapping, multiple contributors, it weakens the family tree tool, and casts light on the complex genesis of Israeli. Thus any linguistic feature of Israeli should be explained in the light of all the languages that have contributed to it. Israeli is not only multi-layered and multi-registered, but also multi-sourced (draws from many different languages). The Zionist enterprise has consciously revived an ancient language that died as a mother tongue in the second century CE. Some 1,750 years later it was brought back to life by charismatic saviours who resurrected that dead skeleton while energizing it – often inadvertently – with their own vigorous mother tongues.

## 4 Israelis and the Bible

Our children’s connection to the Bible is alive and real. Yet there is not a single child who does not feel total alienation towards the Biblical language.<sup>40</sup> (Rosén 1956: 123)

<sup>40</sup> “ויקתם של ילדינו אל ספר המקרא קיימת וחיה, ויחד עם זה אין ילד שאינו חש בזרותה הגמורה של לשון המקרא 123). בשבילי” (רוזן, תשט”ז, עמ’ 123).

It is indisputable that Israelis are unable to read the Bible and understand it without years of extensive training. The reason is now apparent: the Bible is written in a *foreign language*, which uses a different grammar from Israeli. In his opening remarks to the aforementioned linguistic discussion, Asa Kasher asked: “If someone in our neighborhood were to speak the language of the Bible like the prophet Isaiah, or if we had encountered someone from the Mishnah period like Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi, could he understand us? Could we understand him?” (Kasher et al. 1980: 108).<sup>41</sup> Had the Prophet Isaiah attended a Bible class at an Israeli school, he would have found it extremely difficult even to decode the European pronunciation of Israeli speakers. Had he overcome this difficulty, he would have realised that the teachers actually “interpret” the Bible as if it were written in Israeli.

One of the major differences between Biblical Hebrew and Israeli has to do with their dissimilar tense/aspect systems. When Haiim B. Rosén (1956) discussed the different ways in which verbs function in Biblical language and modern language, he wrote as follows:

In many parts of our linguistic system the Biblical language cannot satisfy our current needs. It could not reach the level of clarity that we seem to demand, expressing verb tenses, past, present and future . . . it mainly differentiates between the past and what has not passed; and also in this respect it uses means of expression that seem bizarre to us. (Rosén 1956: 37)<sup>42</sup>

Analyzing the first chapter in the book of Samuel, Eliezer Rubinstein observed:

In terms of use of times all verb forms function differently from the way they do now. The reader who is accustomed to our language, and who does not bother to learn Biblical Hebrew as a language which differs from our language, will fail to understand it”. (Kasher et al. 1980: 120)<sup>43</sup>

Let us begin with several examples that demonstrate the common misreading of Biblical expressions by Israelis (cf. Zuckermann 2008: 65):

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41 יהודה הנשיא, ישעיהו הנביא, או משהו מימי המשנה, שמדבר כמו ר' מזדמן לקרבתנו משהו שהיה מדבר בלשון המקרא, כמו אם היה האם היה מבין אותנו, והאם אנחנו היינו מבינים אותו? (כשר ואחרים, תש"ם, עמ' 108).  
 42 בהרבה מאד חלקים של מערכתנו הלשונית אין לשון המקרא מצליחה לספק את צרכינו היום. היא לא הצליחה למשל להגיע לבהירות, הנראית לנו היום כדרושה, בהבעת זמני הפועל, הווה עבר ועתיד . . . אלא מבדילה בעיקר בין עבר ובין מה שאינו עבר; ואף בזה הנהיגה דרכי ביטוי, הנראות לנו כזרות ומוזרות. (שם, עמ' 37).  
 43 “כל צורות הפועל מתפקדות מבחינת שימוש הזמנים אחרת מתפקוד פעלים כיום. הקורא המורגל בלשונו, ואינו טורח ללמוד עברית מקראית כלשון נבדלת מלשונו, לא יעמוד על כך” (שם, עמ' 120).

- A. Most Israelis understand “*yéled sha’ashu’im*” (Jeremiah 31: 19) as ‘playboy’ rather than ‘pleasant child’.
- B. “*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’.
- C. “*Kol ha’anashim hayod’im ki meqatrot neshehem le’elohim ‘aḥerim*” (Jeremiah 44: 15) is understood by some Israelis as ‘all the men who know that their wives *are complaining* to other gods’ rather than ‘all the men who knew that their wives *had burned incense* unto other gods’.

These conclusions could be challenged on the grounds that we should not base our argument on exceptionally difficult Biblical verses; one could point out that Israeli readers can read numerous verses without any difficulty. Even if this assumption were correct, it entails yet another predicament which might be even more complicated to handle. The problem is that, by and large, Israelis believe they understand the Bible which is written in Hebrew, while actually their interpretation is derived from their Israeli mother tongue, and thus is inadequate, invalid and flawed. Paraphrasing Socrates, we might say they think they know the Bible, while actually they misapprehend it. Eliezer Rubinstein wrote in this respect:

It is true that we are familiar with most Biblical words. However, there is a huge difference in the way they are used. Frequently speakers feel the difference and consult reference books in order to understand the text. But often we do not notice that there is a difference, and attribute to Biblical words that which is not in them, according to the way they are understood nowadays. (Kasher et al. 1980: 120–119)<sup>44</sup>

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 the sequence of time in this sentence: were heaven and earth created at the same time? Is it, therefore, possible that the expression “the heaven and the earth” here refers to the cosmos or world in general? Almost all Israelis do not understand “Heaven and Earth” in its original meaning, which is “cosmos” or

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<sup>44</sup> במלים. לעתים קרובות חש המקראיות שגור ות בפינו. אך כמה גדול ההבדל בשימוש “נכון הדבר, שרוב המלים לעתים קרובות אין אנו מסתייע בספרי עזר בבקשו לעמוד על שיעורו של הכתוב, אך המדבר בהבדל במשמעות, והוא בהן כיום.” (כשר מקראיות מה שאין בהן, וזאת על פי מה שאנו רגילים לתלות עומדים על השוני, ואנו תולים במלים ואחרים, תש”ם, עמ’ 120–119)

“world”. This is a Hebrew merismus which is not common in Israeli, a means to refer to an object by specifying its two ends. How many Israelis can really fathom “*tohu wavohu*” or “*təhom*” (Genesis 1: 2)? The Israeli senses are ‘mess, chaos’ and ‘abyss’ respectively, but a more reliable interpretation of these terms is ‘desolate and empty’ and ‘water’ respectively. The problem seems to be that some alleged Bible experts tend to read the text anachronistically, as if it were composed in their Israeli language.

There are hundreds of examples of words that are frequently misunderstood, and we must keep in mind that the Bible contains only 8,000 different words. Let us look at some more examples:

- לֵב-חָסֵד (pronounced in Israeli as *khasár lev*) (a few references to the book of Proverbs) is ‘stupid’, not ‘cruel’ – since in Hebrew the heart is where thoughts are placed, not feelings.
- דְּעָה (pronounced in Israeli as *deá*) (e.g. Isaiah 11: 9) is objective, not subjective knowledge.
- בֶּטְנִים (pronounced in Israeli as *botnīm*) (Genesis 43: 11) is a type of fruit, but certainly not the Israeli peanut.
- צֶלֶל (pronounced in Israeli as *tsil*) (Judges 7: 13) is ‘bread’ rather than ‘sound’.
- נִיחֹחַ (pronounced in Israeli as *nikhóakh*) (e.g. Exodus 29: 18) is ‘giving pleasure’ rather than ‘good smell’.
- יֶרֶקֶרֶק (pronounced in Israeli as *yerakrák*) (Leviticus 13: 49) is not ‘weak green’ but rather ‘strong green’.
- יוּצֵא צָבָא (pronounced in Israeli as *yotsé tsavá*) (Chronicles II 25: 5) means ‘has not yet joined the army’.
- לְרַב אֶחָיו (pronounced in Israeli as *leróv ekháv*) (Esther 10: 3) means ‘to his many brothers’ rather than ‘to most of his brothers’.
- פְּחָם (pronounced in Israeli as *pekhám*) (e.g. Isaiah 54: 16) is ‘fire, heat’ rather than ‘coal’.

Therefore we should not be surprised when we encounter in a northern Israeli kibbutz a sign saying יוֹלָד כִּי-אָדָם לְעֵמָל יוּלָד *‘ádám lə’ámál yullád* (Job 5: 7). This is interpreted by Israelis as “man was born to do productive work” rather than “man was born to do mischief”. This Biblical sentence stands as an accusation of the inherent wickedness of mankind.

In many cases there is a process of specification: a general meaning in Hebrew becomes a specific meaning in Israeli. For example, Biblical Hebrew עֻגָה (pronounced in Israeli as *ugá*) (Kings I 17: 13) is any kind of pastry, not necessarily a sweet one as in Israeli; דֶּשֶׁה (e.g. Genesis 1: 11) is ‘Herbaceous plant’ rather than ‘grass’; תִּנְשֶׁמֶת (e.g. Leviticus 11: 18) is ‘bird’ rather than ‘owl’; לִרְקוֹד (e.g. Leviticus 11: 18) means ‘hop, jump’ rather than ‘dance’.



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, *נַפְּיִלָה גּוֹרְלוֹת* *nappīla goralót* “let us cast lots” (Jonah 1: 7) was thought by some Israelis we have examined to be rhetorical future rather than cohortative, the latter apparent, for example, in Israeli *yefutar asad* ‘may Assad be fired!’.

Despite eleven years of Biblical training, Israeli-speakers fail to internalize that whereas in Israeli there is a past-present-future *tense* distinction, in Biblical Hebrew there is a perfect/imperfect *aspect* distinction. They 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 as 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?’), which can be used instead of *yala bay*, i.e. ‘let’s go’. Tironut (IDF recruit training) commanders sometimes issue orders 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 Hebrew 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 a Biblical mindset is in harsh contradistinction to the *Weltanschauung* of the *Homo sapiens sapiens israelicus vulgaris* and to the way Israelis read the Bible.

The order of words in a sentence is also completely different in Biblical Hebrew than it is in Israeli. Ask Israelis what “*avaním shahaqú máyim*” (Job 14: 19)<sup>45</sup> 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. Standard canonical order in an Israeli sentence, as well as in sentences in Indo-European languages is Subject-Verb-Object. This order is different from the common order in Biblical Hebrew, and in other Semitic languages. The common order in these languages would usually be Verb-Subject-Object. A standard Biblical verse is written in the form: *וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה* ‘And spoke the Lord unto Moses’.

Linguists utilize advanced scientific means, such as (1) inspecting the way Biblical expressions function in various other contexts and figuring out their meaning accordingly; (2) comparing Biblical chapters to legal documents and

45 “אַבְנִים שְׂחָקוּ מַיִם” (איוב יד, יט).

other texts that were composed in Biblical times; (3) comparing a Biblical text to its earliest translations prepared by scholars proficient in Biblical Hebrew. These measures provide a more reliable linguistic understanding of Biblical language than that acquired by laymen.

Rosén discussed in his book, *Our Hebrew*, the features of modern language, which he called “Israeli Hebrew”. He confronted those refusing to acknowledge the basis of this language and explained that their objection stems from a difficulty in recognizing the gulf between the modern language and the Biblical tongue: “They fear that acknowledging the existence of Israeli Hebrew . . . will turn Biblical vocabulary and modes to a subject that requires study, and will make access to Biblical contents an issue that necessitates prior linguistic training” (Rosén, 1956: 123).<sup>46</sup> Rosén warned against ignoring that problem. He claimed that the bond to the Bible must be cultivated while surmounting a “holy lie” (1956: 124)<sup>47</sup>, according to which Israelis make daily use of Biblical Hebrew. This important proclamation was put in writing more than fifty years ago, and yet Israeli children are persistently told that the Old Testament was written in their mother tongue. In other words, in Israeli primary schools, Hebrew and the mother tongue are, axiomatically, the very same. Therefore one cannot expect that Israelis would easily embrace the notion that these two languages might be genetically different. However, accepting this concept is an essential step for upgrading future Bible teaching in Israel.

## 5 The RAM Bible (*Tanákh RAM*)

Recently, the eminent Bible teacher Avraham Ahuvia and the insightful publisher Rafi Moses launched their project acronymized in the biblionym (in both senses) *Tanákh RAM*. This distinguished translation is of great benefit to students, teachers and the general public. It will prevent Israelis from misinterpreting the Bible by reading it as if it were written in Israeli. Although translation necessarily incorporates commentary and interpretation and cannot be flawless, it is essential for those who are not fluent in Biblical language, i.e. for every Israeli student. Moreover, *Tanakh RAM* carries a considerable advantage over commentaries displayed at the bottom of the page (like Hartom-Cassuto), namely, that an Israeli speaker

46 “חוששים שעל ידי מתן הכרה לעובדות הקיימות של העברית ישראלית . . . יהפכו את אוצר הלשון המקראית ואת דרכיה לדבר המצריך לימוד ויהפכו את הגישה לתכנון של המקרא לדבר הדורש הכשרה לשונות מוקדמת” (רוזן, תשט”ז, עמ’ 123).

47 “שקר קדוש”.

would never consult a commentary if the Biblical phrase were familiar to her or him through their Israeli mother tongue (in which it carries a different meaning).

The Hebrew language ought to be taught. However, having a translation is very useful if the learnt text is written in a foreign language as Hebrew is nowadays. Acceptance of Tanakh RAM by Israeli Bible teachers would upgrade Bible teaching and familiarize students with their classic heritage. Reading Tanakh RAM would not become a substitute for reading the Bible as it is. On the contrary, only when an initial and essential understanding of the Biblical content is acquired through translation, would reading the Bible itself become possible. When Klausner (1957) had read the Book of Job translated into French, he had to admit: “Of course, much of the sublimity of the wonderful Hebrew expressions and the unique idioms of that divine book were lost in translation” (1957: 36).<sup>48</sup> However, only by reading the translated verses did the text become meaningful for him.

We shall demonstrate the benefits of using Tanakh RAM by examining Genesis 15: 9: What is עֵגְלָה מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת *‘egla meshulleshet*? A triangular heifer? Three calves? A third heifer? A cow weighing three weight units? A three-legged heifer? . . . If you studied the Tanakh RAM, you would know because its translation into Israeli is as *egla bat shalosh* ‘a 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).

Again, it goes without saying that the compulsory secularization of the text by Avraham Ahuvia presents some difficulty. Often Biblical verses have countless possible interpretations, while Ahuvia had to choose but one. Nevertheless, the translation is necessary and most helpful since Ahuvia is more experienced and knowledgeable than the common student or teacher. Ahuvia’s translation is dignified and formal. Given its high register, however, we predict that there will be further translations into more colloquial forms of Israeli, which will meet the needs of Israeli youths of the third millennium.

The Torah was translated for the first time during the 3rd century BCE. It was translated into Greek and was designated for the Jews of Alexandria, who at that time had already lost the essential Hebrew knowledge that would have allowed them to read the Torah in its original tongue. The sages preferred the option of having Jews reading the Bible in Greek, over the possibility of not understanding it at all. Having realized that a translated version of the Torah would face huge antagonism, they composed a wonderful legend. According to that legend, the book was translated seventy times by seventy different people, and miraculously

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<sup>48</sup>“ודאי, הרבה מן השגב של המליצה העברית הנפלאה ומן הביטויים היחידים-במינם של ספר אלוהי זה הלך 48 לאיבוד בתרגום הלועזי” (שם, עמ’ 36).

all the versions were identical (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, Page 9a). The rabbis argued that this proved that the spirit of God had guided the translators, and thus the translation was as holy as the original. As a result, the translation became known as “the Septuagint” (LXX, the seventy). We might hope that modern educators will be as courageous and will not hesitate to offer their students a translated Bible suitable for their needs. It is certainly reasonable to expect that at the beginning of the 21st century we could accept and even appreciate an accessible Israeli Bible without making up some myth to justify its formation.

## 6 Conclusions

In 1953, Bible teacher Meir Bloch wrote: “The Bible is not appreciated by Israeli youths. They never study it or read it for their own pleasure. At most they deal with it in order to pass the Bagrút (matriculation) examinations. This state of affairs requires discussion: What is the origin of that crisis? And what might be the way to remedy the situation?” (Shapira 2005: 114).<sup>49</sup> Bloch raised several more questions which can and indeed should be discussed in any gathering of present-day Bible teachers: “Which ideas and principles form the foundation of Biblical teaching so far? What might be the reasons for that failure? What is the state of the profession today? . . . Which way shall we turn?” (Shapira 2005: 114)<sup>50</sup> These honest and painful questions attest that Bible studies have been in a state of continuous failure for decades. Even if the Ministry of Education calls attention to a deterioration in Bible teaching due to budget cuts, we ought to admit that there has never been a golden age for Bible studies at Israeli schools. From the fin-de-siècle days of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda’s son Itamar Ben-Avi till the 21st century, the mother tongue of Israeli children is *Israeli*, and not Hebrew. Consequently, Israeli children lack the skills required to understand the Bible effortlessly. It is essential to take full measures to help them do so.

A consideration of David Ben-Gurion’s assertion that “there is not even one Hebrew book . . . that is so close, intimate to the youth as the Bible” (Shapira 2005: 134)<sup>51</sup> raises a suspicion that these remarks, as well as the epigraph of this article, were written under the influence of his famous “Tanachomania” (Shapira 2005: 122). Shapira (2005) cited this expression, which was used by Ben-Gurion’s

“אין ספר-המקרא מקובל על הנוער, אין הנוער לומד אותו וקורא בו להנאתו, לכל היותר הוא עוסק בו כדי לעמוד ב”בחינות הבגרות. עובדה זו אומרת דרשני: מה מקור המשבר? ומה הדרך להתיקון המצב?” (שפירא, 2005, עמ’ 114) “מה הם הרעיונות והעקרונות שהונחו ביסוד הוראת המקרא עד כה? בשל מה הכשלון? מה מצב המקצוע 50 היום? . . . מה צריכה להיות דרכנו?” (שם).

“לא תמצא אף ספר עברי אחד . . . שיהיה כל כך קרוב, אינטימי לנוער כספר התנ”ך” (שם, עמ’ 134) 51

friends. She used it to describe their efforts to “enhance the status of the Bible while expressing contempt and complete disapproval toward other components of Jewish-Israeli culture” (2005: 22.)<sup>52</sup> Shapira further explained how Ben-Gurion’s attitude toward the Bible evolved. His thesis was that the status of the people of Israel as “the people of the book, the people of the prophets” (Shapira 1997: 230)<sup>53</sup> was the source of their spiritual distinctiveness, which was the key to their mysterious survival throughout thousands of years of exile. Ben-Gurion even attributed the victory in the War of Independence (1948–1949) to the power of Biblical prophetic spirit (Shapira 1997: 230). Shapira explained that there was a correlation between conquering the land during the War of Independence and Ben-Gurion’s attitude towards the Bible on the one hand, and his underestimation of Jewish heritage in the Diaspora on the other (cf. negation of Diaspora and religion in Yadin and Zuckermann [2010]).

Shapira’s study shows that, after the war, Ben-Gurion began to argue that the Bible could only be understood by Israelis who lived in the land of the Bible and were proficient in its language (Shapira 1997: 233). He maintained that the stories of the patriarchs and kings had “more topicality, they are closer and more instructive and full of sap that is essential for the generation which is born, raised and living in the country” (Shapira 1997: 235).<sup>54</sup> He added that “human and social values, which we favour, were articulated in the highest intensity by the prophets. They comprise Jewish redemption as well as universal human salvation” (Shapira 1997: 235).<sup>55</sup>

These quotations provide some explanation for those ostensibly naive phrases cited above. Evidently Ben-Gurion’s comments do not necessarily reflect an acquaintance with youngsters who are fluent in Biblical language. To be more precise, they manifest his vision, as well as his belief, that these young people, who were struggling for the foundation of Israel, were in fact exemplifying Biblical values and reliving the lives of the patriarchs. Ben-Gurion’s vision symbolized a quantum leap in space and time, skipping thousands of years of Jewish survival in exile, and on these grounds he was heavily criticized. Two of his harshest critics were the writer Haim Hazaz, and the philosopher Nathan Rotenstreich (Shapira 1997: 235–240).

<sup>52</sup> “להעצים את מעמדו של התנ”ך תוך זלזול ו ביטול גמור של מרכיבים אחרים התנשאות בתרבות היהודית- הישראלית” (שם, עמ’ 22).

<sup>53</sup> “עם הספר, עם הנביאים” (שם, עמ’ 230).

<sup>54</sup> “יותר אקטואליות, הם יותר קרובים ומאלפים ומלאים לשד חיוני בשביל הדור הנולד, הגדל והחי בארץ” (שם, עמ’ 235).

<sup>55</sup> “הערכים האנושיים והחברתיים, שבהם אנו דוגלים, נאמרו בעוצמה הגדולה ביותר על ידי הנביאים וכוללים גם גאולה יהודית וגם גאולה אנושית אוניברסלית” (שם, עמ’ 235).

However, in light of the fact that nowadays typical Israeli children have no interest in the Bible, we cannot ignore Ben-Gurion's sentiment that this book can actually find a way into the hearts of the youth and enrich their world. When Ben-Gurion was asked which three books he would choose to save if the world were destroyed, he mentioned the Bible, Plato and Buddha (Shapira 1997: 238). Elsewhere (in a letter to S. Yizhar) he mentioned Socrates, "the great teacher of Plato". Disappointed by his discussions with those allegedly smart Athenians, Socrates dedicated his life to conversations with Athenian youths. He aimed to stimulate their analytical thinking and never regretted his choice, although he paid for it with his own life.

That concern for education and for the optimal development of young people which was Socrates', as well as Ben-Gurion's, major concern must preoccupy contemporary educational leadership too. It is also clear that the difficulties in teaching the Bible and the Hebrew language are interrelated. As explained above, Israeli differs from Hebrew in its lexis (vocabulary), syntax, tenses/aspects, semantics, phonetics and phonology, discourse etc. The differences are fundamental and the two are genetically different. Linguistic research proves the existence of a linguistic barrier that makes it impossible to read the Bible in a direct and immediate manner. Bible teachers must therefore take into account that the Bible is by no means written in the native tongue of their Israeli pupils.

Modern linguistics holds that the language acquisition mechanisms used in learning mother tongues are different from those used to acquire other languages (cf. Chomsky 1957). Recent cognitive neuropsychological research (Ibrahim 2009) provides additional scientific support for this theory, while adding an important dimension. It shows that mother tongue usage activates different brain centers than those active whilst using languages that were acquired by other means. Neuropsychologist Rafiq Ibrahim (2010) examined this issue while trying to determine the cause of the repeated failure of Arab students in matriculation exams in Arabic language and literature. His research discovered that students understand literary Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, as a foreign language. It is their second or third language, Vernacular Arabic (e.g. Palestinian/Israeli Arabic) being their mother tongue, followed by the Israeli language to which they are exposed from childhood. However, so far these findings have not been acknowledged, let alone taken into consideration, when determining pedagogical methods and student assessment techniques. Despite the refusal of Arab educationalists to accept these findings, Ibrahim and his colleagues at Haifa University are developing new curricula that will qualify Arab students to comprehend their classic culture.

Jewish Israelis ought to adopt and implement this pedagogical lesson as well. Israel's Education Ministry should attempt to free itself from the *imprisoning purism prism*, which might be somewhat related to self-righteousness, hubris or

simply conservatism or blindness. We should revise the way we teach the Hebrew 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 both joyful and memorable. Such a measure has the potential to reduce Israeli pupils' disdain for Bible lessons, as well as to attract more secular Jews to Biblical scholarship. In fact, established Biblical scholars would benefit from such a move immensely.

Rachel Halabe (2008) drew attention to the fact that while new methodologies, programmes and a great variety of learning aids are employed in teaching modern foreign languages, ancient languages are still taught by “scholars of history or theology who are not trained in foreign language pedagogy” (Halabe 2008). Recently, Magnes Press published Halabe's (2011) three-volume textbook aimed at teaching Biblical Hebrew to native English speakers. Halabe (2010) thoroughly explained the differences between Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew, especially with regard to tenses, aspects and the way verbs are used. However, she wrongly claimed that native “Hebrew” speakers could usually understand it intuitively (2010: 27). We propose here not to discriminate against Israeli pupils and deprive them of their prerogative to learn the language of their ancestors.

Knowledge of the ancient layers of Israeli culture, its literature and philosophy, is important not only for strengthening Jewish identity and expanding the horizons of the public living in Israel. Public debates about religion, culture and civilization are common in Israel, across all social sectors. Such a controversy took place recently, concerning different versions of the “Yizkor” prayer in the military memorial ceremonies. The debate arose following the incumbent Chief of Staff's directive that the binding version will be “May God remember” and not “May the people of Israel remember.” Journalist Amos Harel (2011) referred to it as follows:

This seemingly uncared-for question continues to disturb and excite bereaved parents, religious and secular people, as well as the military rabbinate. The opening words of “Yizkor” have great symbolic value, but the different versions probably reflect the deliberations of the army itself, in a period of complex social changes.<sup>56</sup> (Harel 2011)

It is astonishing, yet emblematic, that a semi-intellectual newspaper like *Haaretz* would report that the different versions reflect the deliberations of the army. The

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56 השאלה הזו, הזניחה לכאורה, מוסיפה להטרד ולרגש הורים שכולים, דתיים וחילוניים וכן את אנשי הרבנות הצבאית. יש למלים בפתח דברי ה“זיכור” ערך סמלי רב, אך הנוסחים השונים משקפים כנראה גם את ההתלבטויות של הצבא עצמו, בתקופה של שינויים חברתיים מורכבים.”



journalist's account strikingly lacks any awareness of the historical, linguistic and cultural background of this prayer and of its previous formulae. Due to lack of space we cannot elaborate on this issue but we shall only note that Berl Katznelson set the wording "May the people of Israel remember" working from a medieval prayer that stated "May God remember". This change was made deliberately, and was motivated by a conscious desire to make Israel, and not God, an object of collective worship (cf. Yadin and Zuckermann 2010). Even if the *Haaretz* military correspondent was unaware of this chain of events, he understood that the question of wording is only "seemingly" uncared for, and that it continues to disturb and excite different groups in Israeli society.

Understanding the religious and historical heritage that is part-and-parcel of Israeli's daily vocabulary will help to deal with Israel's complex moral and cultural issues. This dispute demonstrates that Gershom Scholem's (1926) prediction is occasionally coming true. He argued that the spiritual meaning of Hebrew words would not just vanish, but that their loaded religious meaning would continue to echo through secular use.

Having taken all this on board, we are obliged to give Israeli youth a proper historical, literary and linguistic education. Only genuine understanding of our religious-cultural tradition can provide us with the appropriate tools for dealing with the cultural crises that periodically divide Israeli society. Only by taking this route can we avoid the escalation of false, superficial and superfluous arguments. Only then will we succeed in using these crises as means for cultural renaissance.

As to the future of Bible teaching in Israel, it would be in its best interests to rise above the ideology and self-righteousness characteristic of the Ministry of Education, which still advocates that Israelis speak the language of the Bible. The Bible ought to be taught as a foreign language, or at the least, it should be kept in mind that its language is different from the language which we speak. To the Israeli Bible teacher let us say: "Let my people know!"

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