The Three-Thousand-Year-Old Treasury of Hebrew, Part 1

Borrowed Vocabulary & Modern Slang

by Norman Berdichevsky (July 2023)

The Conversation, Arnold Lakhovsky, 1935

One of the great joys and charms of the English language is

the rich vocabulary and its one thousand year old tradition of absorbing words from many cultures, Anglo-Saxon, Danish, Latin, Greek, Norman-French, Parisian French during the Age of Enlightenment, American-Indian, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian and dozens of ethnic immigrant groups. Why do our books begin with either a Forward or a Preface? Quite simply they are choices left to the individual and reflect the variety we have at our disposal from the thousand-year-old evolution, development and constant borrowings from other languages.

No one has expressed this better or more humorously than Bill Bryson in his best-seller *Mother Tongue*. "English retains probably the richest vocabulary, and the most diverse shading of meanings of any language. We can distinguish between house and home which the French cannot."

And again:

> *One of the glories of English—its willingness to take in words from almost anywhere—shampoo from India, chaparral from the Basques, caucus from the Algonquin Indians, ketchup from China, potato from Haiti, sofa from Arabia, boondocks from the Tagalog language of the Philippines, slogan from Gaelic.*" (*Mother Tongue, The English Language.* Bill Bryson)

Now, imagine what glories await the polished Hebrew reader and speaker who has a language more than three times as old, three thousand years of a continuous literary history to draw from!

The history of the Near and Middle East and Jewish residence in the Diasporas of Europe is often revealed in a single sentence that uses words borrowed from half a dozen civilizations. The following partial list is meant only as an

appetizer to the real feast ahead. Each one of the foreign sources of interaction with Hebrew listed below represent just a smattering of the influence they exerted for centuries.

These foreign languages greatly influenced the addition of vocabulary and were drawn upon by scholars of the Enlightenment who sought to make Hebrew a language fit for use in the latter half of the 19th century. It was due to the genius of Eliezer Ben Yehuda and other scholars that authentic indigenous Hebrew roots could be utilized from the remote past of the Bible and the Mishna to create the basis for the neologisms that came to play an essential role in creating the language of the 20th century.

An educated modern Hebrew reader will encounter dozens of words in an ordinary text that bear witness to the three thousand year pedigree and history of the Jewish experience from its homeland in Ur of the Chaldees from whence Abraham was commanded to find a new land in Canaan, the thousand years of rival Hebrew kingdoms, to the confrontations with Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome and the competing influences of the philanthropic institutions in the Diaspora anxious to exert their cultural heritage upon the Jewish community in Palestine.

Hebrew's Borrowed Vocabulary

Akkadian—Akkad was the general name for the region of Babylon and Ashur starting from the 4th millennium BCE. It was an Eastern Semitic language similar in ancestral form to Arabic and written in cuneiform on clay tablets. The first great literary classics of the Near East—notably the Gilgamesh Epic with its rival story of the Flood and the descent of Ishtar to She'ol were written in Akkadian and exercised a major influence on Hebrew. This is where we get madrichal (architect), gesher (bridge), ulam (hall), delet (door),

haychal (temple), ẖalon (window), yesod (fundament-foundation), tel (hill), kishuf (magic), mabul (flood), mazal (not just luck but the zodiac sign where the stars are located), taẖana (station), gan (garden), aron (closet), igeret (letter). Many of these and dozens of others are still in everyday use.

Greek—Scores of words were absorbed from Greek during the period of close contact with the Sea peoples and Empires of Alexander and his successors. Some of them underwent slight changes after being adopted first by the Romans in their own Latin language. Many were subsequently absorbed by the Romance languages and English and so are immediately recognizable to us. They are often easy to spot because they begin with consonants in combinations— Psy-, Str-, Sf-, Sp-, Ks- —that are not found in Hebrew and had to have a short initial vowel sound "a" (represented by the letter aleph) in order to facilitate their pronunciation for speakers. aklim (climate), geografia (geography), avir (air), santer (chin), orlogin (clock), dugmah (example) zug (couple), mistorin (mystery) sfog (sponge), katedra (faculty), psicologia (psychology), architect (architect), askola (school), itztadion (stadium), itliz (butcher shop), namal (harbor), metropolyn (metropolis), sefel (cup), ogen (anchor), tik (file), michona (machine), filosophia (philosophy), hymnon (hymn), ochlosiya (population), archiyon (archive), polmus (a polemic), pumbi (public), senigor (defense attorney), pundok (pub), astrategia (strategy), sport (sport), tarbut (culture), tachsis (tactics), and many more.

Persian (Farsi) —exercised a major influence on the huge Diaspora created after the destruction of the First Temple. It was the first Indo-European language to exert influence upon Hebrew and continued to do even after the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Original Farsi words entered Hebrew, Greek and Latin going through several transformations such as in Ishpaz (Ishpooz in Hebrew) —aspinj—hospital—hotel/hostel;

bazaar, gizbar (treasurer), duchan (stall or high place), balagan (Hebrew slang originally meaning an attic but eventually with the connotation of a disorderly, untidy place and then as a place of ill repute/prostitution), bustan (tree garden, grove), dat (religion), handasa (engineering), khaki , ethrog, shach-mat (check-mate in chess, meaning the king is dead).

Turkish—a few words and expressions remain from the 400 years of Ottoman rule in Palestine where a majority of Jewish residents used either Yiddish, Arabic and limited Hebrew among themselves. They rarely, if ever, needed to resort to Turkish in order to deal with the authorities. What remains is dunam, the unit of area for land, traditionally the amount a farmer could plough with an ox in a day and later standardized as one thousand square metres; the word "tabu," the property deed to land ownership, and the popular board game "Shish–Bish" (Six-Five, or backgammon). A few other words still extant are dugri (talking straight to the point), kiosk, burekas (the popular baked item with an ingredient of meat or vegetables), tembel (fool or a lazy person), mangal (a grill), baklava, yoghurt and shishlik all of which also entered the major European languages.

Arabic—sister language of Hebrew but with a much younger alphabet and literature. Many words for parts of the body, numbers, family relations, are very close to Hebrew. Many Jewish rabbinical authorities and philosophers learned, spoke and wrote in Arabic during the Middle Ages due to its wide distribution. Ben-Yehuda and other linguists researched possible Arabic roots to evolve new Hebrew words in the middle Ages in mathematics and geometry like nadir, zenith and ofek (horizon), merkaz (center); mahson (warehouse), sabon (soap), rishmi (from rasmy) meaning official, nadiv (polite), and more modern terms such as gerev (sock), boreg (screw), mishmish (apricot), finjan (coffee pot), buul (postage stamp), avzem (buckle), digdug (tickling).

Much slang and coarse profanity were adopted by the early Jewish settlers in Palestine who were reluctant or unable to use equivalent current Hebrew vernacular expressions because there weren't any. Many Arabic expressions are still in common use in everyday Modern Hebrew conversation as well as contemporary spoken Arabic. It was Ben-Yehuda who established the principle that if an indigenous Hebrew root could not be found in original sources, one should first determine if an appropriate Arabic source existed from which to borrow.

Yiddish—Prior to the eleventh century, as we can determine from the list above, Hebrew was primarily affected by the addition of borrowings from the Near and Middle East close to the old homeland of ancient Israel-Judea. The growth of the more recently established Ashkenazi community in the Germanic speaking heartland of the Rhine Valley, Alsace and Central Europe added a new addition that eventually became the principal language spoken by Jews.

Just one hundred and thirty years ago, there were approximately six million Yiddish speaking Jews. No one then was a primary, habitual or native speaker of Hebrew. The battle to establish Hebrew as the national language of a future independent Jewish state would never have succeeded had it not won clear recognition as the only realistic candidate able to call upon the loyalty of Jews everywhere. Thus, the argument was effectively made by Yiddishists that their language was the principal vehicle for Jewish cultural creativity in a national or ethnic sense.

The Close Ties Between the Jewish "Hybrid Languages" and Hebrew

Although Hebrew ceased to be the spoken language of the majority of the Jews in their original Judean homeland between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. it

remained as the most important and prestigious language of religious observance and commentary and heavily influenced the "hybrid languages" that arose in the Diaspora such as Yiddish (Judeo-German), Ladino (also known as Judeo-Español), and several other varieties. These all still use the Hebrew alphabet.

A parallel twin vocabulary also developed between Hebrew and Yiddish, in which words of Hebrew origin (shown in *italics*) were used specifically to designate a concept, occupation, ceremony or item with Jewish content in Yiddish as opposed to the parallel word of foreign origin; *emes* vs. Warheit (truth), *luach* vs. kalendar (calendar), *katsef* vs. fleysh-haker (butcher), *sefer* vs. bukh (book), *levaye* vs. bugrebnis (funeral), *khokhme* vs. Weisheit (wisdom).

Many Hebrew words with a slightly different pronunciation and the accent put on an earlier syllable were absorbed by Yiddish to indicate specific religious beliefs and practices—Shabbos (the Sabbath), milchumah (war), mishpucha (family), koiyach (power), zichronos (memories), melamed (religious teacher), Kaddish (memorial prayer for the dead), rachmanos (mercy, compassion), Yomtov (a holiday). Bris (circumcision). mikve (ritual bath), talis (prayer shawl).

For a time, a lively rivalry existed between the two languages vying for the loyalty of several generations of literary figures, writers, playwrights, philosophers and political personalities. The largest Jewish party in Poland, the Bund, cultivated an autonomous Yiddish culture and until the late 1940s, the vast majority of Jewish immigrants to Palestine were native Yiddish speakers and on the eve of World War Two, there were dozens of Yiddish newspapers in a score of countries and the Zionist movements carried on considerable propaganda in Yiddish.

The mutual influences of Yiddish and Hebrew on each other have been the subject of many lengthy volumes and commentaries and

is a worthy subject for further study. About 15% of Yiddish has a vocabulary that originally derives from Hebrew, a unique process of what might be called “recycling” from original Hebrew to Yiddish and then back to Modern Hebrew!

Yiddish was the language spoken by most European Jews outside the Mediterranean Basin and absorbed influences and words from German, Polish, Russian and Rumanian. Many aspects of Yiddish grammar, vocabulary, syntax, colloquialisms, and spelling remain in Modern Hebrew. Many Yiddish words and expressions also entered English including some that started out in Hebrew like “mazal tov.” According to Dr. Nissan Netzer of the Bar Ilan University Hebrew Department, Yiddish is the foreign language most prevalent in Hebrew slang (48%), followed by Arabic (26%) and English (14%) but of course these Yiddish derived slang words and expressions are used less by Jews of Sephardi-Mizrahi origin than among Israelis of Ashkenazi origin. Many common colloquialisms are direct word for word translations from Yiddish.

The endings -lah (beigelah for beigel; immahlah for “little mother) and -er (macher, Shvitzer, Shnorrer) are universal and Hebrew words corrupted in Yiddish pronunciation—Shabbos, Balahbooste (ba’al ha bayit in Modern Hebrew for a home owner), dos for dati in Hebrew for a religious Jew) and expressions like gournisht and bubkes (nothing), also used in English; drek, nudnik (bothersome person). The suffix -nik denotes membership in any group such as in kibbutznik, Mapamnik; many expressions have been literally translated—the equivalents in English of “knock my head against the wall,” “he is missing a screw,” “don’t take it to heart,” “went lost,” “it became black before my eyes,” and hundreds more. The trend over the past few decades has been the replacement of Yiddish slang with English and neologisms based on authentic Hebrew words.

Many individuals who possessed a love of both languages experienced a soul-wrenching dilemma over the necessity of

“choosing sides” in the increasingly polarized atmosphere of the new society being built. For many committed Zionists, even those who grew up with Yiddish as their first language, there was a conscious identification of Yiddish with the ghetto experience and humiliations of Eastern Europe.

The American public, including millions of non-Jews, have become familiar with dozens of Yiddish words and expressions through dozens of films, plays and novels and the outstanding success of Leo Rosten’s “The Joys of Yiddish, and “A Treasury of Jewish Quotation.” These two best sellers further intensified the sense of complete identity among Jewish folkways, humour, and the Yiddish language.

German—The renascent and new Hebrew of the Zionist colonies was much influenced by the work and philanthropic contributions of wealthy German Jews and was used by a highly educated minority of East European Jews in Poland, the Bohemian lands, the Baltic, Scandinavia and even in the Balkans as the language of culture and technology. The German Protestant sect known as the Templars who established half a dozen agricultural colonies in Palestine at the end of the 19th century cooperated with neighbouring Jewish settlements and influenced their use of German in work processes, technology, construction and agriculture. The German Jewish school network HaEzra (The help) and the technical schools in Haifa (Technikum) established German as the original language of instruction.

Many words in Hebrew were direct word for word literal translations of German words such as Gan-Yeladim for Kindergarten, the words for the months of the calendar, installateur, gummi, beton, dubel, tapete, leiste, shpachtel, shpritzen, auto, gestalt, falsh, retzept, shnitzel, spitze and dozens of others are in use in Hebrew with only a brief shift in pronunciation or stress. Some words were invented by Ben-Yehuda based on German words such as mivreshet (brush) from the German word for brush, bürste, creating the root of a new

word, B-R-Ŝ.

English—The commercial importance of Great Britain, the direct connection of the British Mandate over Palestine with Zionism and the service of Jewish volunteers in the British armed forces during World War II all contributed to the borrowing of many English words into Hebrew associated with the automobile, aviation, seamanship, agriculture and science. The growing influence of the United States and the American Jewish community along with the worldwide appeal of Hollywood greatly increased the number of loan words such as jack, brakes, exhaust, gas, gear, differential, distributor, tire, plus, tank, starter, switch, pedals, fuse, puncture, choke, camshaft, clutch, radiator, carburettor, chassis, underdog, fighter, free kick, knockout, foul, penalty, offside, etc. These words may not be found in a Hebrew dictionary but they are so commonly used that many Hebrew speakers who are aware that there are authentic Hebrew equivalents (neologisms) often prefer to use these English terms lest they be considered as effete snobs (see list below of the endangered neologisms).

Although the Hebrew Academy has issued "native" Hebrew alternatives, many remain in dictionaries for legal use but are rarely consulted. The original English and American terms remain in popular usage due to the overwhelming importance of English in the current Israeli educational system, as a world language for diplomacy and business, and as the most widely accepted language for publishing in international journals. Clearly, English has taken the lead in most recent slang with dozens of words simply given a Hebrew pronunciation so there is little doubt what words mean in their Israeli pronunciation such as hi, okay, job, good-bye, fun, gay, boss, cool, darling, deal, date, DJ, no and *vey*, as in the expression Oy Vey! For the English equivalent of "Oh Me oh My!"

All languages have absorbed impulses from contact with other tongues through migration, conquest, expulsion, foreign rule and cultural interchange and increased familiarity with the

literary heritage of other peoples. Each such contact inevitably presented challenges to whether new terms would be perceived as foreign intrusions or welcome for adoption. Hebrew has such a long pedigree of so many borrowed terms with some adaptation in pronunciation over such a long historical sojourn in different times and places than other languages still spoken today.

The Growth of Slang in Modern Spoken Hebrew (Ivrit Meduberet)

Modern Hebrew, which began only a little more than a century ago, has changed more since then to reflect the needs of a community of speakers than in the preceding two thousand years. Those who have learned Biblical, or Talmudic Hebrew are thus often at a loss to understand modern colloquial Israeli Hebrew unless they have lived in the country for some time. Likewise, a turn-of-the century American or Englishman waking up from a long sleep like Rip Van Winkle would not be familiar with the new meanings acquired by such words as “gay,” “far out,” “blue,” “hot,” “cool,” “wicked,” “boss” or even “brother” and “mother” in the sense they are used today. In the early 1970’s a witty bestseller on classic Hebrew slang *Milon Olami Le’lvrit Meduberet* (*The World Dictionary of Spoken Hebrew*) by Dan Ben-Amotz delighted Israeli audiences.

The Impact of the *Dictionary of Spoken Hebrew*

Author Dan Ben-Amotz was born with the archetypal Yiddish name Moshe Tehillimzeigger. He became a cultural symbol for a generation of modern Israelis. To many, the husky, bearded Ben-Amotz was a cultural icon who set the style for sabras, as native-born Israelis are called. “He helped create the sabra personality,” said Ze’ev Chafetz, a fellow author. *“He was brash, direct, unpretentious, idealistic in some ways, and naive in other ways.”* Ben-Amotz published “To Remember and to Forget,” his first full-scale novel, in 1968. In the book, he

tried to confront such questions as his European past. His parents were murdered in the Holocaust. In Palestine he was sent to Ben Shemen Youth Village, where his teacher was Shimon Peres. He changed his name to Dan Ben-Amotz, feeling the latter had the right sabra sound. Reinventing his personal history to portray himself as a true native sabra, Ben-Amotz claimed to be an orphan who had relatives in some of the older Zionist settlements.[1]

In the 1940s, Ben-Amotz served in the Palmaḥ and joined the naval arm, Palyam during the 1947–48 war in Mandatory Palestine.

Slang relies on being able to appreciate the context of the subjects under discussion and an implied familiarity with the social and political realities of the society in which the language is used. It is for this reason that Americans and Britons, or Irishmen and Englishmen do not necessarily laugh at the same jokes.

Ben-Amotz's book still has many fans due to the humour and accompanying illustrations in the form of photos, sketches, advertisements and cartoons. Its success was startling. The first edition was sold out in three days (Jan. 27-29, 1972) and then went through six more editions within four months! Many of the terms were pure English, Yiddish and Arabic such as babysitter, big shot, upside, overhaul, ex (former).

A great many expressions are simply verbatim translations of slang expressions from English or Yiddish such as the Hebrew equivalents for "the night is still young," "move your rear end," "nose in the air" or else they are combinations of invented Hebrew terms with Yiddish endings such as kolboynik

(for Kol–bo everything in it) and kloomnik from the Hebrew word for nothing for "a good for nothing."

Dr. Nissan Netzer of the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Languages at Bar-Ilan University, found that 630 of the approximately 2,600 slang terms in contemporary Hebrew were inspired by Yiddish. Less frequent, but more interesting, are the expressions that arose as part of the environment in which the Yishuv (Zionist settlements) found itself such as *'al ĥeshbon ha-Baron* (at the expense of someone else) –a reference to the Baron de Rothschild's subsidies to half a dozen early settlements.

The last time I visited Israel in May, 2018, I noted among the many changes, a much greater use of American profanity of a vulgar kind. Additional favourite topics are exasperation with the bureaucracy and ultra-orthodox establishment, the kibbutz way of life, snobbism, the very wealthy and very poor, the rock music scene, thuggish gangs, undesirable behaviour in public places, smuggling, Jews of different geo-cultural origins, and army slang or those which are immediately understood due to a familiarity with social media, facebook and twitter.

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