

Tarbut—The Diaspora Educational System that Supported Hebrew as Israel's National Language

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (June 2023)



Tarbut Hebrew School, Shoshana Eden

Throughout Europe and in much of Latin America and South Africa, *“Tarbut”* (Culture), was a vibrant Zionist educational movement and Hebrew school system that arose to create a new sense of nationhood distinct from those Jews who looked to traditional responses as their “solution” to the problem of growing anti-Semitism. This included working for the cause of civic equality as citizens of the nation-states where they lived, attempts at assimilation and rejection of any identification with any sense of a Jewish nationality or religious community, but for some also meant an attachment to some kind of cultural autonomy based largely on Yiddish culture, essentially that of their parents’ generation.



Poster publicising Tarbut schools, Poland. It reads “The Hebrew School is the Creative Soul of the Nation” (left), and Israeli postage stamp celebrating the 75th anniversary of Tarbut (right).

In the more liberal democratic states in the Baltic and in Czechoslovakia and even in autocratic, Catholic and ultra-nationalist Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, the presence of the Zionist political and a Hebrew cultural alliance created a

true “Jewish-Palestinian Homeland in the Diaspora,” demanding respect and acknowledgment from both the authorities and even the local nationalist forces that the *Tarbut* movement consisted of a genuine modern nationalist-Jewish minority committed to a cultural transformation and emigration to Palestine under the auspices of the British Mandate.

In his best-selling Hebrew novel, “A Tale of Love and Darkness”, Israeli author Amos Oz’s aunt Sonja, a native of Rovno, Poland tells in her own words what she and her sister felt after finally succeeding in being able to leave Poland just before the outbreak of the war and what her “homecoming” to the Land of Israel meant after her many years in the *Tarbut* movement.

Early one morning, I can even tell you the precise date and time ... it was exactly three days before the end of 1938 just after Hannukah—exactly before the end of 1938, Wednesday 28th December—it happened to be very clear, almost cloudless day ... And suddenly, almost in an instant, above the line of the clouds the winter sun appeared and below the clouds was the city of Tel Aviv; row after row of square, white-painted houses, quite unlike houses in a town or a village in Poland or Ukraine, quite unlike Rovno or Warsaw or Trieste but very like the pictures on the wall in every classroom at Tarbut ... So that I was surprised and not surprised. I can’t describe how all at once the joy rose up in my throat, suddenly I wanted to shout and sing. This is mine! All mine! That evening Tsvi and Fania took me out to see Tel Aviv. We walked to Allenby Street and Rothschild Boulevard ... I remember how clean and nice everything looked at first glance in the evening, with the benches and street lights and all the signs in Hebrew; as if the whole of Tel Aviv was just a very nice display in the playground of the Tarbut school.

Oz, the most well-known Hebrew writer of our generation, whose literary works have been translated into 47 languages including Chinese and Esperanto, recounts the close connections his family maintained with relatives in Europe and the sense of wonder, confidence, creativity and inspiration that infused the Zionist-Hebrew alliance among young Jews in Eastern Europe. It was instrumental in helping them to cope with the prevailing sense of apprehension, depression and fear that increasingly paralyzed Jewish communities throughout the world following the ascension of the Nazis to power in Germany.

Nobody imagines what was really in store, but already in the twenties almost everyone knew deep down that there was no future for the Jews with Stalin or in Poland, or anywhere else in eastern Europe, and so the pull of Palestine became stronger and stronger. Not with everyone, naturally. The religious Jews were very much against it, and so were the Bundists, the Yiddishists, the communists, and the assimilated Jews who thought they were already more Polish than Paderewski ... But many ordinary Jews in Rovno in the twenties were keen that their children should learn Hebrew and go to Tarbut ... and the echoes that came back to us from the Land were simply wonderful—the young people were just waiting, when would your turn come? Meanwhile everyone read newspapers in Hebrew, argued, sang songs from the Land of Israel, recited Bialik and Tshernichovsky, split up into rival factions and parties, ran up uniforms and banners, there was a kind of tremendous excitement about everything national ...



Nature lesson in Tarbut school, Pinsk, Poland, 1936

The curriculum was overwhelmingly secular, including science, humanities, and Hebrew studies, and Jewish history. Modern Hebrew was the main language of instruction in almost all subjects at all levels. It was established in 1921, when the first *Tarbut* conference was held in Warsaw. It operated kindergartens, elementary schools, secondary schools, teachers' seminaries, adult education courses, lending libraries and a publishing house that produced pedagogical materials, textbooks and children's periodicals.

The school system's own publishing house produced *Shibolim* (*Ears of Wheat*), a Warsaw bi-weekly published during 1922-1923 which featured both voweled and unvoweled text, making it suitable for children of all ages. It also ran *Olami*, a bi-weekly from 1935-1939, for Grades 1-7 and much of its material included current events in Palestine alongside information about Jewish life in Poland.

By 1939, it had some 45,000 students enrolled in about 270 institutions and these included about 25% of all students enrolled in Jewish schools in Poland. It comprised 9% of Jewish students in all Polish schools! The leading names in the Hebrew revival, poet Chaim Nachman Bialik and Zionist leaders Nahum Sokolow and Vladimir Jabotinsky were active supporters and fundraisers.



Postwar Tarbut school in
D.P. camp, Föhrenwald,
Germany

Miraculously, during the war years, a few schools, notably one in the city of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, continued to function under the auspices of the Soviet authorities which served the large population of Jewish refugees from Poland despite Soviet rejection of the Polish government in exile based in London, and its dogmatic opposition to Zionism. The graduating *Tarbut* students took high school matriculation exams, and as a result were able to continue their higher education after the war.

The survivors came from the most diverse European countries and a majority had lost their parents and siblings and almost all had lost their skills during the war years others and had never had a chance to learn anything. These schools initially lacked adequate classrooms, textbooks, notebooks and other equipment. Initially, there were few professionally-trained teachers in most of the DP camps, but new Hebrew speaking staff was dispatched from Israel. As well as core subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics, Hebrew, Jewish history and the geography of Israel were included in the curriculum.

Jabotinsky's View: The Unity of Hebrew Nationalism and Language

Among the strongest supporters of the *Tarbut* movement were political leaders of both the Left and the Right. Ze'ev Jabotinsky, charismatic leader of the Zionist Revisionist Movement regarded as the "Father figure of the political Right" in Israel, was a monumental literary as well as a major political personality, a talented author and poet with a fantastic capacity to master languages. He stressed that it was the inherent right of the majority nation even in bilingual or multinational states to maintain its language and culture in a dominant position while at the same time ensuring that loyal minorities could pursue their own identity enjoying a measure of state respect and acknowledgment. Working together with the great Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik, the two tried to raise funds to enable the *Tarbut* movement to continue and expand enrolment.

Both subscribed to the principle that the Transition from the Exile to Eretz Israel is not a physical move, but a move towards the concretization of the state concept on the territory requiring a radical and fundamental change in the thought patterns, feelings, approach and innermost structure of the soul of the individual and the collective.

During the Mandate (1920-48), the dominant force in the Zionist movement was decidedly secular and aspired to creating a national home or eventual autonomous community/state in which Hebrew would be the national language and devoid of any original religious connotation. This view changed considerably among the elite in the new state after 1948, who began to regard Israel in the "apocalyptic" terms not as a normal nation-state united by territory and language but the Holy Land of all the Jewish people, "*A Light unto the Nations.*"

The first vision did not seek to make Israel the nation-state of all Jews but only those whom Herzl had predicted would not

be able to or wish to assimilate. The strong Hebrew national character of the Jews in Palestine was a matter of choice and affiliation with Herzl's original Zionist vision (A State of the Jews—i.e., only those who wished to establish it, whatever their motivation). Herzl did not promote the exclusivist apocalyptic vision of the leadership among many orthodox Jews in the Israel of today (“A Jewish State”) that seeks to speak for all Jews in order to maintain strict adherence to religious law and believes that they are destined to affiliate with Israel and eventually become its citizens. Obviously, the two terms have a different significance for non-Jews who are Israeli citizens. One asks them to regard the state as principally but not exclusively Jewish; i.e., a state of the Jews and others, whereas “The Jewish State” tells them that they cannot truly identify with it. The large presence in Israel today of the “Ultra-Orthodox known as “Hareidim” who opposed the Zionist movement would have been unimaginable to Herzl and other early Zionist leaders.

The Current Growing Gap Between the Diaspora and Israel

The general current lack of interest in the Modern Hebrew language throughout the Diaspora today in contrast to the situation prior to 1948 is an unfortunate result of the decline in the worldwide Jewish devotion to the national rebirth that Zionism sponsored. Almost three quarters of American Jews have never visited Israel and only a minority in the Diaspora are familiar today with such beloved singers as Haim Moshe, Boaz Shar'abi, Yehoram Gaon, Zohar Argov, Shlomo Ber and even of the old favourites from the era of 1948-56 like Shoshana Damari and Yaffa Yarkoni.

The modern Hebrew culture of Israel, especially in song, dance, popular music and song, design of embroidery, jewellery, and religious ornaments has a major Sephardi-Mizrahi (Eastern), particularly Yemenite component with many

more metaphors and colourful language than most current pop songs. In a national sense, the Hebrew language, so successful in Israel, has, in the Diaspora slowly retreated, following the disappearance of the dynamic atmosphere of the campfire, the pioneers and victorious Israeli army of 1948, 1956 and 1967 that produced dozens of wonderful songs of dedication, sacrifice, victory and enthusiasm.



Modern Tarbut School in Buenos Aires, Argentina

There is much about contemporary Israeli society and its rough edges as well as what has been called “post-Zionism” that made idealism wear thin. The litany of daily frustrations, the pressure of an intense hothouse atmosphere of constant tension, the political involvement of many ultra-Orthodox and their rejection of any other mindset or alternative form of Jewish identity as well as a largely aggressive, archaic, obtuse and obdurate bureaucracy that exerted a heavy toll on many Zionist idealists as the “final straw” issue that drove them away.

In Europe and South America, the local traditional Jewish communities or older ones than in the United States devoted more attention and enthusiasm to cultivating Hebrew oriented secular and religious Jewish education along the lines of the pre-World War II *Tarbut* movement in Eastern Europe immortalized in the memories of Amos Oz. Its schools continue to exist and even flourish in Mexico, Chile and Argentina and European countries such as the United States, Spain, France, Holland, and Belgium.

The Uneasy Relationship Between Zionism and the Movement to Revitalize Hebrew in North America

The Zionist Organization of America was founded in 1897 simultaneously with the first Zionist Congress but it was not until 1916 that the major organization to promote and popularize the Hebrew language the *Histadrut Ivrit* began. From the start there was a formal declaration of unity and cooperation but, as time revealed, the relationship was often problematic. From its inception, the ZOA was designed to promote sympathy for the Zionist cause and the adoption of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 ensured that it was dealing with a practical program and not an idealistic dream.

When the *Histadrut Ivrit* began, the great majority of its members were themselves recent immigrants or the children of recent immigrants from Eastern Europe whose first language was Yiddish and who were struggling to learn and master English. Although sufficient in numbers to support several newspapers and periodicals and even the publication of original Hebrew literature by talented writers who had learned Hebrew in their youth while in Europe, the audience for these publications dwindled rapidly. They came to be dependent on subsidies from the much larger and more financially stable ZOA.

The success of Zionist diplomacy in the creation of the Partition Plan and creation of the State of Israel produced a renewed wave of support for Hebrew language programs. This primarily took the form of summer camps among Jewish youth but by the early 1960s before the dramatic events culminating in the 1967 Six Day War, many among the most proficient Hebrew speakers in North America and other Diaspora lands had already emigrated and settled in Israel where they continued their work. Dedicated teachers continued to do noble work but their resources were insufficient and many Jewish parents became apathetic and unwilling to support Hebrew education let alone

the Tarbut schools beyond the need to be conversant with synagogue prayer and ritual.

In summing up the impact of the *Histadrut Ivrit* in the United States on the occasion of the organization's 80th anniversary, Dr. Moshe Pelli, veteran Israeli scholar and long-time resident in the U.S. (former Professor at the University of Central Florida, where I taught Hebrew for several years) had this to say:

Even though the Hebrew movement has always been a minority group within American Jewry, it has catered to the cultural elite of writers, educators, professors, rabbis and professionals. As such, it set the cultural and literary tone among its followers and was instrumental in establishing the pedagogic values and cultural criteria in American Hebrew education. (Hatarbut Ha'ivrit Ba'America, Shmonim Shnot Hatenu'ah Ha'ivrit Be'artzot Habrit (Hebrew Culture in America, Eighty Years of Hebrew Culture in the United States), 1998.

The Hebrew-Yiddish Controversy in American Politics

The popularity and impressive achievements of the revival of spoken Hebrew on which the *Tarbut* movement had depended got off to a very slow start in the United States due to the very close linkage between the dominant Yiddish Press and the Liberal-Left stance of most American Jews that intensified during the 1930s. The three major Yiddish newspapers reached a combined circulation of close to half a million. Although paying attention to events in Palestine and the Zionist movement they gave little coverage to the language issue. The *Jewish Daily Forward (Forvaerts)* began life as a Yiddish language Jewish-American national newspaper published in New York City in 1897, originally edited and published by the

Socialist Labour Party. The *Forvaerts* became a leading U.S. metropolitan daily and reached a nationwide circulation of more than 275,000 in the early 1930s.

The much smaller Communist Newspaper in Yiddish strictly followed the party line from Moscow. The *Morgen Freiheit* (*Morning Freedom*) with about one-tenth circulation was, nevertheless, the largest foreign language Communist newspaper and was openly hostile to the entire Zionist enterprise until the Soviet vote in favour of the partition of Palestine in November, 1947. A third daily which my father read, *Der Tag* (*The Day*), which began in 1914, was sympathetic to Zionism and friendly towards the Democratic Party-labour union activity but not hostile towards Hebrew.

In 1927, Zalman Shazar (future president of Israel) visited the United States on a tour to promote the Zionist movement and influence public opinion. In his memoirs, he recounted the surprise and astonishment of prominent Jewish socialist leader Victor Berger upon learning that Hebrew was actually a spoken language in Palestine. Berger was an immigrant from Germany who settled in Milwaukee (where Golda Meir lived in her youth). He led the American Socialist Party and was a representative to the American Jewish Congress. Berger had argued during his time as editor of the socialist newspaper, *The Leader*, against "the reactionary nature of Zionism," unaware of the successes that *Tarbut* had achieved. He sympathized with the European socialist Yiddish Bund movement in Europe that sought to establish regional cultural autonomy.

Berger found it unbelievable that the Zionist workers' movement in Palestine was so strong that it had established a viable daily Hebrew newspaper and an extensive literature. He confessed to Shazar that he had never received accurate information about the language situation but he knew that Hebrew was always "associated with clerical circles" and could therefore not be a progressive force. Not until Shazar actually pulled out of his pocket a copy of *Davar*—the

newspaper of the Labour Movement, could he actually accept that he had been mistaken. Berger was thrilled and raced into the adjoining room with the newspaper and shared the new information with his fellow workers and party members about a language that had come back to life after a long sleep. He had to explain to them that the newspaper was not written in Yiddish like the *Forvaerts* but in what he called "*Biblese*."

An hour later, Shazar addressed the public gathering attended by Berger, his wife (a counsellor for cultural affairs for the city of Milwaukee), daughter and other members of the *Milwaukee Leader*. Although Shazar's talk was not on their agenda, Berger warmly endorsed the movement to promote Hebrew among the Jewish workers in Palestine and their union activity. It is no wonder that much of the traditionalist Jewish communities in Eastern Europe speaking Yiddish (including both the orthodox religious segment, the *Bundists* who favoured cultural autonomy and the communists) all realized how much of a challenge Modern Hebrew and Zionism presented to them, their way of life and political views.

The modern renaissance of Hebrew created a national modern form of economic activity, song, dance, literature and other elements of popular culture drawing upon the ancient past that still bear radical secular and nationalist overtones. The *Tarbut schools* and educational movement brought all these elements to the Diaspora. Nothing less could solve the growing dilemma and danger that faced the Jews of Europe on the eve of the Holocaust. Only a radical transformation that laid the groundwork of nationhood afforded what would have been an escape route for an entire people who were trapped by the Nazis' genocidal plans. Yet, these drastic transformations have also increased the emotional distance between much of the Diaspora and the modern State of Israel over the past fifty years. Hebrew educators struggle today with finding creative ways to diminish this gap and feel that they stand in the breach to prevent it from growing into a break.

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