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RESURRECTING
HEBREW

2008

NEXTBOOK · SCHOCKEN · NEW YORK



Resurrecting Hebrew

through the ground-floor hallway had brought his image into my unconscious. I still didn't know what a *yarmelaki* was. Could it be an echo of the Yiddish word for head covering? The presence of the *Limerant* was easier for me to explain. Not that I had ever seen such an anomalous creature, but recently I had become interested in imaginary animals and, as a result, had acquired an old copy of *The First Voyage Round the World*, by Magellan, an 1874 edition translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley, about imaginary kingdoms. It contained references to a couple of beautiful dead birds from "the terrestrial Paradise" called *Bolom Nimatha*. The birds were said to be "large as thrushes, [with] small heads, long beaks, legs slender like a writing pen, and a span in length." Instead of wings, they have "long feathers of different colours, like plumes. . . . They never fly, except when the wind blows."

I had been intrigued by these curious animals, but it wasn't the *Limerant* I was most attracted to. The part of the dream that kept coming back to my mind involved the unintelligible woman. Was it really Hebrew she was speaking? How come I couldn't understand her? Why did she undress? And how to explain the reference to God needing help? Several months later, I told a friend who has known me for decades about the dream. I described it to him in detail. His response was unexpected.

"Have you forgotten your Hebrew?" he asked.
"Why?" I didn't have much to say. "Maybe I have. There was once a time when I could speak it fluently. But I haven't used it for years." I paused. "Yes, I have abandoned it."

He said that I was going through a period of language withdrawal.

I had never heard the expression *language withdrawal* before, yet I immediately felt guilty.

My friend said, "Losing one's Hebrew might be a synonym for losing one's soul."



A week later, I received in the mail from this friend a used copy of *A Dream Come True*, the autobiography of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. With it came a succinct note: "Ilan, your dream about the strange bird with the long beak? It could have been dreamt by Ben-Yehuda. Do you know what *Eliezer* means in Hebrew? My God has helped."

The name Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was familiar to me. In my youth I had read about how the Lithuanian-born lexicographer had devoted his life to a single mission: to revive the three-thousand-year-old biblical language, to adapt it to the modern world by making it a centerpiece of Zionism, the movement that began in the nineteenth century to create a state for the dispersed Jewish people.

So I delved into the book. I didn't find Ben-Yehuda's writing inspiring. His style was careless, repetitive, and indistinguishable from a standard nineteenth-century autobiography of a colonial in the British Empire. He might have been a Zionist icon, but in his writing—at least in *A Dream Come True*—he was rather unsophisticated. The book is a

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narrative of his life from the moment he discovered "the fire of love for the Hebrew language" up to 1882, the year when, having settled in Jerusalem, his son Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda, described as the first child in modern times to speak Hebrew, was born. (Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda, later called Itamar Ben-Avi, would grow up to become an important Hebrew journalist.) It's clearly a patch job, pulled together from installments Ben-Yehuda published in Hebrew in the periodical *Ha-Toren* from December 1917 through December 1918.

Ben-Yehuda's writing may have disappointed me, but I was hooked. My friend had sensed an inner disquiet in my response to his question about losing my Hebrew.

I was overwhelmed by a desire to reclaim the language, not only as a skill—to communicate with others in it, to live with it, to be inhabited by it—but to find out everything I could about its history.

I had learned my Hebrew as a child at the Yidishe Shule, the Bundist day school I attended in Mexico City. The school was decidedly secular. Our heroes were luminaries like Sholem Aleichem, Marc Chagall, and Mordecai Anielewicz, representatives of Yiddish civilization in the world into which Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was born. The education I received was built on the idea of difference. As Mexican Jews, we were told we were unique because of our millenarian journey across the globe. We were Mexicans because our forebears had immigrated to that country from the Pale of Settlement. Most important, we were Jews. And being Jewish meant being somewhat abnormal, not in the psychological sense but in the political one. Many of us disliked this

message. We fought to be like everyone else. But, as a teacher of mine once said to me, it is precisely our desire to be like everyone else that makes us different.

I still remember my second-grade teacher writing on the blackboard the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which she used to introduce us to the multifaceted world of *Yiddishkeit*. She explained them by means of music. The class sang for most of the session a number of different songs. The one that stuck in my mind is the lullaby "Oyfn Pripetchik" (in English, "At the Fireplace"). Originally titled "Der alef-beys," it was composed by Mark Varshavsky, whose compilation *Yiddish Folk Songs* was published in 1900. Steven Spielberg used the song—to my taste in a saccharine fashion—in his film *Schindler's List*. In English, it reads:

A flame burns in the fireplace,
the room warms up,
as the teacher drills the children
in the *alef-beys*.

"Remember dear children
what you are learning here.
Repeat it again and again:
kometz-alef is pronounced *a*."

When you grow older
you will understand
that this alphabet contains
the tears and the weeping of our people.

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When you grow weary
and burdened with exile,
You will find comfort and strength
within the Jewish alphabet."

Once the singing had ended, we would talk about the letters one by one: about *aleph*, *bet*, *gimel*, *dalet* . . . The teacher would ask us to come up with a word starting with another letter. I remember her telling me once: "Ilan, you're a lucky boy. Your name starts with *aleph*, the first letter of the alphabet."

When I did further research, I found out that "*Oyfn Pripetchik*" was popular, in part, because of the discovery of Varshavsky's work by the Yiddish litterateur Sholem Aleichem, author of the classic *Tevye the Dairyman*, on which the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof* was based. During the Holocaust, the lullaby was turned into a ghetto song, with the following modified line: "At the ghetto wall a fire burns, the surveillance is keen." In the Soviet Union in the sixties, it was a clandestine tune. But in the Mexico of my childhood, it was a portal to the Yiddish alphabet. It wasn't the Hebrew letters that the teacher was teaching us, but the *alef-bets*. Our Bundist forebears, methodical in their hatred of religion, were biased supporters of the *mame-loshn* in the language wars that since the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, had divided the Jewish people between secularists and their enemies, the Orthodox. They wanted to elevate Sholem Aleichem's tongue to new heights. They wanted us to be a link to its future.

Hostility toward Hebrew began to diminish when I was in my teens. Among Mexican Jews, the seventies were a period in which Zionism, as an ideology, made a dent in our consciousness. Israel, riding on the wave of military self-assurance that resulted from the Six-Day War, sent proselytizing emissaries to the various Jewish communities of the Diaspora, hoping to persuade youth to make aliyah—return to the Promised Land. Latin America, with the fourth-largest concentration of Jews worldwide (after the United States, the Soviet bloc, and France), was a prime target, especially Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, where most Jews were concentrated.

Hebrew-language classes became mandatory in the Yidishe Shule. Textbooks were imported from Israel. Their Socialist images (tractors, irrigation devices, pails and shovels) were at odds with the bourgeois life Mexican Jews lived. We learned about David Ben-Gurion, the first Israeli prime minister, about the valiant one-eyed army man Moshe Dayan, about the martyred soldiers of the War of Independence. We learned about the kibbutz as the self-sustaining agricultural model of the future. And we learned about Diaspora Jews in the Middle Ages, such as Yehuda Halevi and Nahmanides, who at some point in their lives had decided to leave their country of origin to make aliyah. Some died in transit; others arrived safely, and lived and died in the Holy Land. Concomitant to our existence in the land of the Aztecs was another nation that was also ours. It was only a matter of assuming our birthright for it to grant us full-fledged citizenship. Were we ready to ascend?

Maybe.

Not only the present reality of Israel but the history of Zionism became an important part of the curriculum. In order to understand the struggles of the modern country, a constellation of Zionist thinkers was presented to us: Theodor Herzl, Moses Hess, Max Nordau, Berl Katzenelson, Ahad Ha-Am, Vladimir Jabotinsky, Chaim Weizmann, and . . . yes, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Like most of my friends, I learned the essentials about Ben-Yehuda. I don't remember being particularly interested in his plight, though. Herzl, a Hungarian-born journalist whose mission became clear during the Dreyfus Affair in France, was far more attractive. One of my teachers gave me segments of Herzl's 1896 manifesto, *The Jewish State*. It was arguably the most affecting piece of Zionist literature that crossed my eyes at the time.

My grandmother Bela Stavchansky was a Polish Jew who had immigrated to Mexico, where her three children were born; she was widowed in 1965. At one point she traveled to Israel and brought me back a small bottle of colored sand (yellow, orange, red, and green) from the Negev Desert as a souvenir. She told me that as soon as she descended from the airplane in Tel Aviv, she had knelt down and kissed the ground. Every Jew from the Diaspora longs to return to the holiest of places, she said. The kiss is proof of our inner longing.

I kept the bottle on one of the shelves in my bedroom for years but seldom thought about it.

When I made my own first trip to Israel in 1979, I didn't think about kneeling and kissing the ground. Nor did I look

at the sand in the desert as more significant than the sand with which I had built castles, fortresses, and other sophisticated architectural structures during summer vacations in Acapulco. Still, I had deferred my entrance to college to live in Israel for a year. Life in the Diaspora was confusing to me. What was I, a Mexican or a Jew? Did I need to choose between the two? What made me Mexican other than the accidental route my ancestors had taken to the New World from Poland and the Ukraine in the twenties?

I lived in a number of places. I spent months in Tel Katzir, a kibbutz of about four hundred people, created in 1949 near the Sea of Galilee. My tasks were multifold: I worked in the banana fields, did carpentry, milked cows and helped them to give birth to their calves, fed the ostriches, and washed dishes in the kitchen. After I left the kibbutz, I shared a small room in Yemin Moshe, the bohemian section in Jerusalem. And I spent time writing in a somber apartment in Haifa.

During that period, I fell in love with a beautiful army recruit from Petach Tikvah who was about to get married. The nights we spent together, before she was called back to her base, still linger in me.

Israel for me then was about sex and sweat. The Yom Kippur War had taken place six years earlier. Although it had been a resounding triumph from a military point of view, it had come at a terrible price, and the euphoria of the previous two decades had receded. It was becoming clear to Israelis that their Arab enemies, while incapable of casting them into the Mediterranean Sea as they repeatedly prom-

ised to do, weren't ready to renounce their hatred of the Jewish State. Furthermore, the Palestinian refugee problem was growing.

Many of my teachers at the Yidishe Shule had been Mexican women who had learned Hebrew in *ulpan*s, intensive Hebrew-language programs. But I also had some *shlichim*, pedagogical envoys from Israel the school had hired to bring the Zionist ideology to its student body. The *shlichim* told me about foresting the desert, building bunkers to protect the population from falling Katyushas, consolidating financial institutions to make the nation more solvent. They were proud of their nation, built on Socialist principles but capable of making peace with capitalism. However, their pride had a double edge. It concealed an element of condescension toward the Jews who had not returned to Israel. We were in need of redemption—still in bondage. They perceived the Diaspora as synonymous with backwardness. In their eyes, that odious psychological vulnerability needed to be eradicated.

In Israel I was eager to practice my Hebrew, to speak like a native as soon as possible. I made it a task to get the news from the newspaper *Haaretz* on a daily basis. Within a short time, I was reading writers such as Hayyim Nahman Bialik, the leading poet of the Hebrew renaissance, the Galician-born novelist Shmuel Yosef Agnon, and the younger crop in the original.

I found scores of Jews like me—dislocated tongue-snatchers ready to make the leap to become natives.

Much as I tried, I couldn't feel fully at home. I soon realized that, deep inside, I liked being divided: Mexican *and*

Jewish. Or, more precisely, I found that the concept of difference the Yidishe Shule had instilled in me had permeated my entire identity. In the streets of Mexico I had been singled out as a Jew, making me feel uncomfortable, though not altogether unwelcome. My skin color was different, my name was different (I was born Ilan Stavchansky), my education was different. I didn't fit in . . . and I liked it.

Discomfort can be a pleasant sensation.

I left Israel in 1980. Not once in the years that followed did I think of returning there permanently as an option. Hebrew took a backseat.

A few years later, I immigrated to New York City. English became my primary language. I also became infatuated with the crossbreeding of tongues: English entering the realm of Spanish, French making inroads into Arabic, Turkish absorbing elements of German. My work as a writer appeared under the pen name Ilan Stavans. In due time, it became my persona.

For the next twenty years, Israel might have been on my mind whenever I read the news. I saw the tragedy of repeated terrorist attacks and systematic military retaliation from afar. I was comfortable in my Diasporic fishbowl.

My dream changed all that. Language withdrawal: What kind of relationship did I retain with Hebrew? Was it defined by Israel? How could one conceptualize the itinerant life of the language from prebiblical times to its contemporary incarnation? There was definitely something deeply perplexing about my relationship with the language. Had I given up on a central aspect of my identity? To what extent was I, a

reluctant speaker, an integral part of the history of Hebrew? The friend to whom I had first related my dream had told me that losing one's Hebrew is like losing one's soul. Had I become soulless?

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I needed to gain some perspective on the development of Hebrew as an ancient language, and for this there was one friend I wanted to talk to: Angel Sáenz-Badillos.

Sáenz-Badillos lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he is loosely affiliated with Harvard's exchange program in Spain. His daughter, a pediatrician, works in the area, and Sáenz-Badillos and his wife, Judit Targarona, moved there to be near her and her family. For years Sáenz-Badillos taught the history of the Hebrew language and its literature at Madrid's Universidad Complutense. Targarona is the author of a popular Hebrew-Spanish dictionary. Most important, Sáenz-Badillos is the author of an unsurpassed history of the Hebrew language, first published in Spanish in 1983.

I find it ironic that a Spaniard—and a non-Jew, for that matter—should be one of the world's authorities on the subject. Centuries ago Spain was a center of Jewish learning. But since the expulsion of Jews in 1492, the peninsula has been nearly devoid of Jewish culture. Little remains of the academies dedicated to philosophy, translation, and the exact sciences. Poetry flourished in Hebrew (inspired by

Arabic models), but today very few of the celebrated names are taught in schools. One gets the impression, upon visiting Spain these days, that the country has done everything in its power to erase its Jewish roots.

Thus, my fascination with Sáenz-Badillos. I knew that a consultation with him would enable me to get a better grasp on Hebrew.

Sáenz-Badillos was a patient guide as he walked me through the uniqueness of Hebrew in the community of tongues. As a Semitic language, Hebrew developed in the Near East, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, in the late second and first millennia B.C.E. Among the earliest archaeological items available, the Gezer Calendar, discovered by R. A. S. Macalister in 1908 and preserved in Istanbul's Museum of Antiquities, dates from the tenth century B.C.E., the time of King David and King Solomon. Its six lines are a record of the labor connected to the construction of a tunnel at the time of King Hezekiah, mentioned in 2 Kings 20:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:3 and 33:14. This means that the language used in previous periods is, to a large extent, still unknown. A number of scholars—among them the nineteenth-century German archaeologist Hugo Winckler, who discovered the capital of the Hittite Empire—suggest that cuneiform was the system of writing used in ancient Israel. Others believe that the square Hebrew alphabet was already in use at the time when Moses supposedly lived in Egypt, orchestrating an upheaval to liberate the slaves from Pharaoh's control.

"What kind of Hebrew did you learn in Mexico?" Sáenz-Badillos asked me.

I wanted to know more about Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. How did he come to Hebrew? I sought anything I could put my hands on that was connected with him, no matter how loosely.

For Ben-Yehuda, literal and linguistic exile was an unfaithful torment. "All my life I have been inconsolably grieved about two things," he wrote in *A Dream Come True*. "I was not born in Jerusalem, not even in the land of Israel. And my speech, from the moment I was able to utter words, was not in Hebrew."

He had been born Eliezer Yitzhak Perelman into a Hasidic family in the Jewish Quarter of the small village of Luzhky. The year was 1858. The village was part of the Russian Empire ruled by Czar Alexander II. The first of eight children, Ben-Yehuda was a sickly boy diagnosed with tuberculosis at a time when the illness didn't have a cure, a fact that confined him to his home, where he became an avid reader. His father, a Habad Hasid who died when Ben-Yehuda was quite young, was an impractical man who spent time poring through books and engaging others in Talmudic discussions. Ben-Yehuda's mother was savvy and entrepreneurial. At first the couple received money from their respective parents. But when Ben-Yehuda was still young, his mother opened a small grocery store in their home to sell wax candles, flour, and other items.

What role did Hebrew play in his childhood? It was the

archaic tongue of sacred literature. It was mostly written, not spoken. The glimpse he got of the Talmudic discussions the elders engaged in confirmed to him that its oral use was limited. For the most part, these discussions were in Yiddish with a few Hebrew quotations sprinkled throughout, mostly, he would say later, "to display pompous wisdom." It was surely not a living language—but not a dead one, either.

Ben-Yehuda felt attracted to Hebrew because of its universal quality. Litvaks and Galitzians alike, as folks from Lithuania and Galicia were known, could understand it when they read it. So could the Jews of Istanbul. The revival of Hebrew as a modern tongue wasn't exclusively the domain of Ben-Yehuda. Psalms 137:5 has always been a cornerstone in Jewish life: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." In antiquity, the line was recited in Alexandria, in Algiers, in Seville. The language spoken in the land, the language of the psalms, and the land it dreamed of fused into a single vision of wholeness. And so Zionism and the revival of Hebrew have been intimately connected.

The infrastructure for the revival of Hebrew began centuries before Ben-Yehuda's effort. Among the earliest modern literary manifestations was *Zabut Bedibuta de-Kiddushim*, a late-sixteenth-century play by J. Sommo. There was also the Yiddish-Hebrew dictionary by Elijah Levita, the Renaissance-period grammarian, poet, and author of the *Bore Bukh* (1507–8), the most popular chivalric romance composed in Old Yiddish. *Ha-Me'assef*, a quarterly review, appeared between 1783 and 1797, and between 1808 and 1811.

Likewise, the weekly *Ha-Maggid* began to appear in Russia in 1856. And there were Hebrew-language newspapers in Ferrara, Italy, and Dessau, Germany. Finally, Abraham Mapu's *Ahavat Tziyyon*, the first novel ever to be written in Hebrew, was released in 1853.

In modern times, the way was paved by rabbinical commentators who, while not discussing the issue directly, set the conditions for its consideration. Yehuda Alkalai from Sarajevo stated in his 1834 booklet *Shema Yisrael* that he thought it unwise to wait until God gave a sign to establish Jewish colonies in the Holy Land. He saw it as "the necessary preparation for the descent of the Divine Presence among us; afterward, He will grant us and all Israel further signs in His favor." Likewise, Zevi Hirsch Kalischer from Posen, a province in western Poland, wrote in *Derishat Tziyyon (Seeking Zion)* (1862) that "to concentrate all one's energy in the holy work and to renounce home and fortune for the sake of living in Zion before 'the voice of gladness' and 'the voice of joy' are heard—there is no greater merit or trial than this."

Naturally, the issue of returning to the Promised Land was alive long before Alkalai and Kalischer. Redemption is a Jewish concept. The Talmud (Tractate *Shabbat* 118b) states: "It is taught in the name of Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya [ca. 60–130 C.E.]: 'Everyone who dwells permanently in the land of Israel, recites the *Shema* morning and evening, and speaks the sacred tongue is assured that he will dwell in the World to Come.'" After the Babylonian exile, redemption took on a new meaning. It was no longer about devotion; the idea of

return became attached to it. To live in the Promised Land and to speak Hebrew—therein lay redemption.

Many of the founding fathers of Zionism thought it cumbersome to teach the masses a language they perceived as fossilized. Why waste energy in such tasks? There were numerous other worthy endeavors, many believed. Theodor Herzl, a German-speaking Hungarian-born journalist and arguably the central force behind the Zionist pursuit, was himself among them. (Herzl was Ben-Yehuda's junior by two years.) In his pamphlet *The Jewish State*, which appeared in 1896, Herzl doesn't mention Hebrew as part of his nationalist project. Indeed, he envisioned German to be the language of Israel. Shortly before his death in Vienna in 1904, Herzl said: "We cannot converse with one another in Hebrew. Who amongst us has sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway ticket in that language?" It was left to others to link linguistic and national resurrection.

Ben-Yehuda's embrace of secularism derived from the mix of his rebellious spirit and his gravitation toward teachers and thinkers who combined their views of orthodoxy with an interest in Western culture. Since becoming a rabbi in his DNA, he enrolled in a yeshiva in Plotzk, which at the time was a center of Hasidic learning in Lithuania. But instead of devoting himself exclusively to rabbinical exegesis, Ben-Yehuda came across a string of teachers who introduced him to Western literature. Believing that reading secular literature could lead to a regretful life, the family sent Ben-Yehuda to Vilna, where he met Samuel Naphthali Herzl Jonas, who also was attracted to Enlightenment litera-

ture and ended up becoming his father-in-law. (His first marriage was to Jonas's eldest daughter, Dvora.)

Later on, when Ben-Yehuda dropped his religious studies and attended a gymnasium in Dünaburg, the Latvian commercial city on the western Dvina River, he became mesmerized by the ideological debates that surrounded him: socialism, anarchism, communism, bundism. From all of them he chose Zionism.

It is important to keep in mind that the Pale of Settlement at the time was nearly powerless. Since the Enlightenment, Jews had intermittently been invited to become part of civil society. But their admittance to it was halfhearted. They didn't have the same rights and privileges as the rest of the population. What attracted Ben-Yehuda to Zionism was the concept of universalism. He wanted to stop seeing Jewish history as an appendix, an exception in world history. *Normality* was the key term. He became convinced that he needed to apply his energy to the quest for Jewish self-determination. But Ben-Yehuda's decision to devote himself to Zionism brought along with it unwelcome consequences. "The rumor passed among my friends that I had become a heretic and was now a different person. Some of them left me," he writes.

A person's life is often decided in a single instant: the instant in which one knows forever who he or she is destined to be. For Ben-Yehuda, the epiphany came in his adolescence, still in Plotzk, when a Talmudic exegete, Rabbi Yossi Bloicker, made him realize that Hebrew was more than the language rabbis had been speaking for generations. Bloicker

gave him a copy of *Tzohar ha-Tenab (Painter of Nature)*, a book of grammar. It revealed to Ben-Yehuda that there were books written in a beautiful style in the sacred tongue. Then Bloicker brought out another book from under the chair, where it had been hidden, and asked Ben-Yehuda to read its title and first paragraph aloud. It was the Hebrew translation from the German by I. Rumsch of *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, published in Vilna in 1861.

Ben-Yehuda was flabbergasted. Could the sacred language, the language of the Bible, the Mishnah, and the Gemara, be used for such mundane matters? Was it possible that the language of King David and the prophets, the language that Maimonides and others had connected with the divine, could convey secular content? No sooner had Ben-Yehuda begun to enjoy *Robinson Crusoe* than someone knocked at the door. Rabbi Bloicker, afraid Defoe's book would be seen by the wrong eyes, grabbed the volume from his pupil's hands and returned it to its secret hiding place. The item was dangerous; it needed to be protected from unwelcome exposure. Ben-Yehuda understood then what Hebrew was capable of. But he also recognized that the road he was about to travel was filled with obstacles.

The serendipity of his encounter with *Robinson Crusoe* allows for another interpretation. Daniel Defoe's novel is a remarkable Hebraist parable—doing it all yourself, making it all by yourself. Maybe Ben-Yehuda himself ought to be seen as Robinson Crusoe, alone on his island, battling the elements, improvising as he goes along, indomitable in his self-reliant spirit.

In a copy of the Russian journal *Vestnik*, Ben-Yehuda read about a character in George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* who promulgated Hebrew as the national language of the Jewish people. Then, around 1877 or 1878, as Russia went to war against Turkey in order to liberate Bulgaria from Turkish rule, he became impressed by the Bulgarian struggle for independence. He wasn't yet twenty years old. A fever of nationalism was spreading across Europe. But Ben-Yehuda's views were already marked by Zionism. If the Bulgarians required their own country, shouldn't Jews embrace a similar dream? For a moment he wondered if Yiddish, not Hebrew, should be the Jewish national language. But he discarded the *mame-loshn* as ungrounded. It was used by the Ashkenazim, the Jews from Eastern Europe, but it didn't connect them to their biblical past. Hebrew did. And so Ben-Yehuda came up with his romantic mission.

The Jewish population worldwide at the end of the nineteenth century was estimated to be 10,600,000. About two-thirds were Yiddish speakers. Russia had a Jewish population of almost 4 million. The United States, where Yiddish was also prominent, had more than a million and a half. Turkey, still the center of the Ottoman Empire, where French, Arabic, and Ladino were spoken, had approximately 282,200 Jews. What kind of plan did Ben-Yehuda have? How would he be able to implement it when a large number of Jews lived in rural areas and were almost illiterate?

In 1879 Ben-Yehuda wrote "The Burning Question," the essay Sáenz-Badillos had discussed with me in his office and arguably Ben-Yehuda's most recognized piece of writing. In

it he encourages the embrace of Hebrew as a crucial component of Zionism. In his view, the revival of Jewish nationalism and the resurrection of the biblical tongue went hand in hand: "Let us revive the nation and its tongue will be revived, too!" Historians of the State of Israel see his essay, and the series of letters he wrote to contend with its reception, as a milestone in the history of Zionism. When Ben-Yehuda tried to get "The Burning Question" published, it was swiftly rejected by many magazines. It wasn't until he mailed it to *Ha-Shahar* (*The Dawn*), a periodical edited between 1868 and 1885 by another Lithuanian, Peretz Smolenskin, that the message fell on attentive ears. Smolenskin published "The Burning Question," but with his own rebuttal.

The essay was read widely and generated much controversy among Jewish thinkers. It started an epistolary debate between Ben-Yehuda and Smolenskin. In one letter from 1880, Ben-Yehuda summarizes their back-and-forth:

Were I not a believer in the redemption of the Jewish people, I would have discarded Hebrew as a useless impediment. I would then agree that the *Maailim* of Berlin were right in saying that the Hebrew language has purpose only as a bridge to enlightenment. Having despaired of redemption, they could see no other use for this language. For—permit me, sir, to ask you—what is the Hebrew language to a man who is no more a Hebrew [Ben Yehuda's synonym for Jew]? Is it more to him than Latin or Greek? Why should he learn the Hebrew language or read its renaissance literature? Why,

indeed, must the "Science of Judaism" be expressed only in Hebrew? Of what value, in fact, is such a science? How can a science which can be discussed only in its original language be worthy of being called knowledge? Where is there a people whose learning and wisdom can be expressed only in its own language?

Elsewhere he adds:

It is plain for all to see, sir, that our youth is abandoning our language—but why? Because in their eyes it is a dead and useless tongue. . . . Only a Hebrew with a Hebrew heart will understand this, and such a man will understand even without our urging. Let us therefore make the language really live again! Let us teach our young to speak it and then they will never betray it!

But we will be able to revive the Hebrew tongue only in a country in which the number of Hebrew inhabitants exceeds the number of gentiles. Therefore, let us increase the number of Jews in our desolate land [Palestine]; let the remnant of our people return to the land of their fathers: *let us revive the nation and its tongue will be revived, too!*

And he concludes:

I therefore contend, sir, that we have strayed from the right path. It is senseless to cry out: Let us cherish the Hebrew language, lest we perish! The Hebrew language can live only if we revive the nation and

return it to its fatherland. In the last analysis, this is the only way to achieve our lasting redemption; short of such a solution, we are lost, lost forever! Do you, sir, think otherwise? The Jewish religion will, no doubt, be able to endure even in alien lands; it will adjust its forms to the spirit of the place and the age, and its destiny will parallel that of all religions! But the nation? The nation cannot live except on its own soil; only on this soil can it revive and bear magnificent fruit, as in days of old!

Ben-Yehuda's Zionism was linguistic. You might almost say he wanted Jews to create their own country so that they could speak Hebrew in it. The land was a stepping-stone for linguistic redemption—a way of moving into the future and back to Sinai at the same time.

7

How to make the dream come true?

At the age of twenty-two, Ben-Yehuda found his mission inchoate. It would take him two decades to sort out the question. Jack Fellman, an American who studied linguistics, semantics, and Middle Eastern studies at Harvard—where he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Ben-Yehuda—summarized Ben-Yehuda's threefold approach: he called the first stage "Hebrew in the Home," the second "Hebrew in the School," and the third "Words, Words, Words."

The first stage required personal sacrifice. Life in Lithuania, Russia, and France (Ben-Yehuda studied at the Sorbonne in Paris) was unacceptable. Ben-Yehuda was ready to make aliyah, to ascend to *Eretz Yisrael*. In 1881, he and his wife, Dvora, moved to Jerusalem via Turkey. The misery and anti-Semitism in the Pale of Settlement at the time had begun to drive Russian Jews to America, where the liberal, educated Ashkenazic Jews from Germany had already put down roots. But the couple moved in the other direction. They arrived in Palestine just as the first wave of settlers were making their way to the *yishuv*, as the early Jewish settlement was then known. That group was called the First Aliyah. Its advent took place between 1882 and 1903. "From the moment my feet trod on the land of my fathers," writes Ben-Yehuda, "I tried with all my might to become a native part of it. I embraced its dust with affection, breathed in its air thirstily, and gazed in delight at its mountains and valleys, at the glorious changes in the colors of its skies, at the rising and setting of its sun. I listened with a feeling of sanctity to the murmurs of its rivers and streams, and I can say that I feel myself to belong altogether to this land, to be a Jerusalemite. I have severed every link between myself and other countries, and I feel love for one land only, the Land of Israel. I love not only the country itself but also its very hardships, its ailments, and its fevers."

It was upon arriving in the Holy Land that Ben-Yehuda Hebraized his name. He felt that Perelman denoted a servile, Diasporic, and hence vilified identity. He wanted to have a new self, a new identity—like Malcolm Little becoming

Malcolm X. In the Torah the father's name established a man's lineage. His father's name had been Yehuda; thus, he chose Ben-Yehuda (son of Yehuda). In addition, Yehuda was the tribe from which modern Jews purportedly descended. By calling himself Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, he would stress his connection with the biblical past.

But the perception of Ben-Yehuda as the sole mover and shaker, the man who redeemed ancient Hebrew and made it into a modern tongue, is false. It was unquestionably a collective effort by a quixotic generation of Zionists who understood the deep connection that existed between language and nationalism. Along with other Zionist teachers, artists, intellectuals, and activists, Ben-Yehuda pushed for the formation of elementary schools and centers of advanced learning, where Hebrew would become a conduit for research in the humanities and the sciences. As time went by, he and others would focus their effort on making Jerusalem the capital of the emerging new culture, in spite of the fact that the city was occupied and that Jaffa was for a while a more suitable place, since it was the thriving port of entry through which the new immigrants passed as they arrived in Palestine.

Ben-Yehuda became involved in editing and writing for the weekly magazine *Ha-Hanatzlet* (the word refers to a desert flower), which at the time was under the direction of Israel Dov Frumkin. The connection with Frumkin would lead Ben-Yehuda to start his own publication, a monthly supplement called *Menassehet Tziyyon* (*The Zion News*). Spreading the gospel through the printed media was crucial. His es-

says, reviews, and columns were invariably about the relevance of Hebrew to the Zionist project. His most important editing job was in yet another newspaper, the subscription-based *Ha-Tzvi* (*The Deer*), modeled after *Le Figaro*, in which he focused far more on lexicographic topics. It was essential for Ben-Yehuda to bridge the private and public realms. In his view, the first order of business was to lead a model existence by making Hebrew the family's domestic tongue.

It's difficult to fathom how complicated that decision was. The sacred tongue, unused for centuries on a daily basis, was cumbersome. Its archaic lexicon had been frozen since the Rabbinic period. The language had been spoken in the Tannaitic era (around 200 C.E.), but it gradually evolved into a literary medium in which the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Tannaitic exegetical commentaries (known as *midrashim*) would be written. To make it come alive, Ben-Yehuda would need to create a bank of modern terms. What would a steam engine be called? Or a vaccination against polio? Or a street-light? Hence, the stage of Hebrew in the home entailed verbal improvisation. This is how Ben-Yehuda portrays the effort in *A Dream Come True*:

[My first wife] is the first Jewish mother in our time to speak to her children in Hebrew from the moment of their birth. . . . Our material position was not then one of the best. My salary at the Alliance school was, as I have already said, fifty francs—which is ten dollars—per month, and the remuneration for editing *Hanatzzelet* was twenty francs, which is four dollars, likewise per

month. But these four dollars a month were not paid exactly on time by the publisher of *Hanatzzelet*. Not, heaven forbid, because of ill will, but simply because he himself did not have them to give me each and every month. With this generous income of about sixty francs, or twelve dollars, a month, it was difficult even at that time in Jerusalem to employ many servants. However, it was possible, even with this income, to keep one maidservant, at least a young one, to perform at least the simpler domestic duties, for at that time one could find a girl of about fifteen to serve a house for half a *mejida* a month, which is less than a half-dollar.

The excerpt offers a glimpse of *yishuv* life—with servants and all. It surely challenges the common belief that all settlers were equally destitute. He continues:

And the pregnant woman, the future mother of the boy, was weak and frail by nature, and her stressful life, the pregnancy, and then the birth weakened her even more. Nevertheless, she agreed willingly not to employ a housemaid, so that the child would not hear the sounds of any language other than Hebrew. We were afraid the walls of the house, the very air in our room, would absorb the sounds of the foreign language as they issued from the mouth of the maidservant, and their echo would reach the ears of the child. We feared that those foreign sounds would impair his faculty for hearing Hebrew, the Hebrew words would not be absorbed adequately and properly, and the child

might not speak Hebrew. Experience proved afterwards that these were superfluous, exaggerated fears. We saw many examples afterwards in which children who grew up in an environment that was not purely Hebrew, and whose ears were not as protected against the absorption of non-Hebrew sounds, nevertheless grew up speaking Hebrew as long as the main language in the home was Hebrew and the father and mother spoke Hebrew. Moreover, subsequent experience also proved that in a Hebrew home, where people spoke only Hebrew to one another and were punctilious in their Hebrew speech, the maidservant herself, especially if she was young, quickly learned the words that were for everyday domestic life and was herself careful to avoid uttering foreign words. All this we learnt from later experience, when Hebrew speech among children was already a fact and there was no place for doubt about its feasibility.

Ben-Yehuda is unconsciously portraying himself as Robinson Crusoe. But there are also biblical echoes in the passage: Palestine is presented as a Garden of Eden, Dvora is Eve, and Hebrew is a mechanism transforming religious values into linguistic redemption. To succeed in their pursuit, the couple needed to get all the inner strength they could muster and face a degrading environment:

But at the beginning of the experiment, when everything was still in doubt, we feared even the remotest eventuality. We wanted to surround the child's speech with one protective fence after another, one wall after

another, in order to keep away from his ears any admixture of foreign sounds. This holy soul, who was destined to be the first mother in the era of national revival, who was to supply the nation with a generation of Hebrew speakers, willingly took upon herself the hardships of raising a child without the most elementary domestic help, even though she was herself very weak and frail. The dear soul stood this hard test for a long time, alone and unaided doing all the domestic chores, and also all the work of caring for the child—until the danger passed, until it was granted to us to hear the first stammering of Hebrew words coming out of the child's mouth, until it was granted to us to hear childish babble in Hebrew.

One of Ben-Yehuda's early goals (the second stage in his plan for linguistic resurrection) was to make Hebrew the language of instruction in Jewish schools all over Palestine. This task also proved challenging. He got a job as a teacher in schools managed by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an international organization founded in Paris in 1860, which was created to improve on the education and professional development of Jews around the world but also committed to the principle of self-sufficiency. In Palestine at the time, the pedagogical models were European. Hebrew had never been a language taught in secular classrooms. There weren't any textbooks available. Along with his teaching colleagues, Ben-Yehuda was forced to improvise.

Other teachers have left testimonies of the task. One of them, David Yellin, a friend and supporter of Ben-Yehuda,

stated: "Every teacher had a French or Russian teaching book of his own, and he organized his Hebrew work according to it. . . . Terms for teaching did not exist. Every village teacher was an Academy [of the Hebrew Language] member with respect to creating words according to his taste, and everyone, of course, used his own creations." Similarly, David Yudeleviz, another teacher, commented: "Without books, expressions, words, verbs and hundreds of nouns, we had to begin teaching. It is impossible to describe or imagine under what pressure the first seeds were planted. . . . Hebrew teaching materials for elementary education were limited. We were half-mute, stuttering, we spoke with our hands and eyes." The penury, in Ben-Yehuda's opinion, was worth it. In 1886, he wrote in *Ha-Tzvi*: "The Hebrew language will go from the synagogue to the house of study, and from the house of study to the school, and from the school it will come into the home and . . . become a living language."

Orthodox communities had lived in Palestine for centuries. The magnetism of the Holy Land kept the place alive. But those Jews were few in number. They lived in precarious economic conditions, mostly sustained by the *balukhab* system, an organized collection of money designed to support Jews about to make aliyah and poor Jews already living in Palestine. Initially Ben-Yehuda thought he could convince the Orthodox to share his dream. It was a foolish thought. In her biography, Dvora Omer talks about how immigrants applauded Ben-Yehuda, but the rabbis despised him. They "regarded him as an infidel for daring to use the holy tongue for everyday matters." Their objection targeted both his teaching and his ideas. He had become active in

politics, asking people to support Zionism without reservation. "They objected violently to the articles in his papers which advocated the return of Jews to farming and labor. They instructed their followers not to subscribe to the paper."

But the situation was more complex. Joseph Gedaliah Klausner, another influential Zionist and a celebrated scholar of Jewish religion, history, and literature who also made aliyah from Lithuania, once remarked on this captivating aspect of Ben-Yehuda's personality: his impostorship. Klausner stated that when Ben-Yehuda and Dvora arrived in Jerusalem, so as "to ingratiate himself with the Orthodox Jews who knew written Hebrew and could, therefore, readily speak the language, Ben-Yehuda at first adopted their customs." To achieve his objective, Ben-Yehuda returned to the ways of his childhood, which he had repudiated as a student of the gymnasium. "He grew a beard and earlocks, and prevailed upon his wife to wear a *shyrtl* [wig]." But, according to Klausner, the strategy backfired. "The Orthodox Jews of Jerusalem soon sensed that for Ben-Yehuda Hebrew was not a holy tongue, but a secular, national tongue, and that his purpose for introducing spoken Hebrew was solely nationalist and political. They began to suspect him, and Ben-Yehuda became an extremist in his antireligious attitude. He registered as a national Jew 'without religion.' " That opposition from the Orthodox would color his entire career; actually, it would outlast him. To this day there are segments of the ultra-Orthodox world that see him as the enemy. They are appalled by his dishonesty. Did he really pretend to be one of them in order to advance his mission?

There was suspicion enough that when Ben-Yehuda's wife died in 1891, he was told she wasn't a believer and would thus need to be laid to rest outside the confines of a Jewish cemetery. He was furious. The dispute was eventually resolved, but it left a wound in him that would be reopened years later. By then he had married Dvora's sister, Hemda. This practice was not uncommon at the time. On her deathbed, Dvora herself made the arrangement: "If you want to be a queen," she wrote her sister, "hurry to Jerusalem and marry my prince, my darling Eliezer." As it turned out, for decades Hemda would fight at Ben-Yehuda's side to achieve the dream of reviving Hebrew, to the point not only of producing stories, translations, manifestos, newspaper columns, and even a biography (or better, a hagiography, for Ben-Yehuda was a saint in her eyes), but also of contributing to his dictionary (among others, she coined the word *ofnab*, fashion) and traveling to Europe in search of a publisher and funds for the enterprise.

Eventually, the Orthodox, in cahoots with the Ottoman rulers, increased the pressure on Ben-Yehuda to an extreme. They found an article that his mentor, Samuel Naphthali Herz Jonas, had written in 1894 for a Hanukkah issue of *Ha-Tzvi* that included the phrase "let us gather strength and go forward." As Joseph Klausner later attested, "Some of Ben-Yehuda's more bigoted enemies distorted its meaning and interpreted it to the Turkish authorities as 'let us gather an army and proceed against the East.' [He] was charged with sedition." While the Turkish authorities held him, the affair became news around the Jewish world. Furthermore, just as they had done to Baruch Spinoza and other heretics in the

past, the Jewish religious authorities in Turkey—in partnership with their Orthodox colleagues in Jerusalem—pronounced a *berem*, a ban that excommunicated him. In *Tongue of the Prophets*, one of the Ben-Yehuda biographies, its author, Robert St. John, an Associated Press reporter, describes the trial that ensued. News items were published regularly in Istanbul, Vilna, Odessa, Paris, London, and New York. "Finally it came down to a cable from ben Yehuda [to his family] which contained just one Hebrew word: *zakkay*, innocent," stated St. John. A one-year prison sentence was handed down, but he was allowed to post bail. More important, he could appeal the sentence. What he couldn't do, according to the Ottoman rule, was continue publishing *Ha-Tzvi*. And he needed to curtail his educational activities.

It was time for Ben-Yehuda to refocus his life. His passion was lexicography. He wanted to justify his life by creating a dictionary that would rehabilitate the sacred tongue, making it usable in Palestine for the thousands of Jewish settlers. After the affair with the Orthodox, he didn't want to think about anything else.

I was taken by Ben-Yehuda's tribulations: he had betrayed the Orthodox, whose traditions had inspired him; he was excommunicated from his own people; he turned to a dictionary the way Rashi turned to commentary; and he found newness in an old language and was unswerving through its inversions, transmutations, and reconfigurations.

the way for the establishment to deprive someone of a legacy: force people to remember your name, but not what you did.”

Nowodworski laughed. “Cecil Roth once said that before Ben-Yehuda, Jews *could* speak Hebrew, but after him they *did*. It isn’t totally true, though.”

“Why?”

“It’s a known secret that he didn’t revive Hebrew.”

“What did he do, then?”

“Well, he convinced himself he did. But others were equally involved in the endeavor. I would say that rather than praising him for reviving a moribund tongue, we should credit Ben-Yehuda for reinventing it.” Nowodworski took a breath. “Keep in mind that the second half of the nineteenth century was a time of linguistic utopias. Take the case of Esperanto, an international language created by a doctor, Ludwik Lazar Zamenhof, born in Bialystok, then in Russian-ruled Poland, in 1859 (a year after Ben-Yehuda) to parents of Lithuanian Jewish descent. A Zionist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1910 but failed to get it, Zamenhof died in Warsaw in 1917 and is buried in the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery. The vocabulary of Esperanto is derived from the Romance, Germanic, and Slavic languages, although the logic of Esperanto is derived from the use in Hebrew of consonant stems. For instance, in Esperanto the word *sano*, meaning ‘health,’ is related to the words *sana*, ‘healthy,’ *sanulo*, ‘a healthy person,’ *sanilo*, ‘a cure, medicine,’ *sane*, ‘healthily,’ *malsano*, ‘illness,’ *sanigi*, ‘to cure,’ and *malsanulejo*, ‘hospital.’ It’s the exact same structure!”

I was surprised not to be exhausted after a fourteen-hour

flight. On the contrary, I was exuberant. The conversation was putting my mind to work.

Soon Nowodworski and I were walking on Ibn Gabirol Street, between the Tel Aviv City Hall and Gan Ha’ir, near the memorial stone that marks the site where Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated.

Pointing at it, Nowodworski said: “They come and go. Our political leaders manipulate us. They look for ways to implement their own dreams. Some die in the process.” We were now looking at the memorial. An adjacent wall still displayed the graffiti painted by young Israelis lamenting Rabin’s departure and the death of a peace process. “Only their language remains,” said Nowodworski.

As we walked toward my hotel, he commented: “I’m not sure how many young Israelis today are able to recognize, with precision, the fathers of Zionism. But there’s a song about Ben-Yehuda. Do you know it?”

He was referring to a ballad composed by Yaron London with music by the popular baritone singer Matti Caspi. The ballad was made famous by Chava Alberstein on her album *Songs of My Beloved Country*. This English translation is by Malka Tischer:

Like the prophets, zealous about *Hashem*,
he was zealous about the verb, the adjective, and the
noun.

And at midnight, oil lamp in his window,
he would write in his dictionary stacks
and stacks of pretty words, words
which fly, which roll from the tongue.

Eliezer, when will you lie down to sleep?
You're practically bent over.
And Hebrew, which has waited two thousand years,
will still be waiting for you at dawn.

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda,
an amusing Jew.
Words, words, words
he invented with his feverish brain.

As Nowodworski recited the lyrics, I realized that this was the only song I knew about a lexicographer. It plays on words, as in *Hashem*, meaning God (literally, the Name), and *shem*, which also means "noun," as in the second line of the first stanza above. It also plays on Ben-Yehuda's obsession with words, definitions, the biblical past, and his own legacy as a founding father of Zionism. As Tischler suggested in a note accompanying her translation, it pays attention to biographical facts, such as that Ben-Yehuda suffered from tuberculosis and worked standing up, so as not to give in to tiredness. Even if he wasn't solely responsible for the revival of Hebrew, the song stresses Ben-Yehuda's symbolic status as torchbearer:

If Hebrew has slept for two thousand years, *nu*, so
what?

Come, let's wake it up, and invent initiative
[*yotz-mab*],
clothes iron [*mag-betz*], bomb [*p't-zatzab*],
furniture [*ribut*].

With feather tip, in fluid writings,
he wrote cauliflower [*k'rimit*], he wrote ice cream
[*g'lidab*];
And he went on creating words,
and his fast quill didn't rest,
and the language grew
and didn't recognize itself in the morning.

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda . . .

And when a son was born to him, he said:
This firstborn I will call Ben-Yehuda, Itamar,
who from infancy to withering,
from the day of his entering the covenant
[*brit-milab*] until his death,
will have a covenant with Hebrew,
and will fight to wipe out foreign languages.
Itamar truly became a man,
tall, handsome, and well-spoken,
and the language he spoke was Hebrew.
Itamar Ben-Avi,
whose father was a prophet,
a man after my own heart.

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda . . .

"Itamar Ben-Avi was Ben-Yehuda's eldest son," I said to
Nowodworski, proud of my knowledge. "One of a total of

eleven siblings. Ben-Yehuda raised him in linguistic isolation—not even allowing the child, as he wrote, ‘to hear the songs of birds’—so that he would be ‘the first Hebrew-speaking child.’”

Nowodworski told me, “Ben-Avi became one of the most distinguished Hebrew-language journalists of his generation.” Although the song makes reference to the *brit milah*, the circumcision covenant between a Jewish boy and God, in Ben-Yehuda’s antireligious mind, his son’s covenant was first and foremost with Hebrew.

As an experiment to find out if Israelis know about Ben-Yehuda, I stopped at a corner newsstand, where I bought copies of Friday’s weekend editions of *Haaretz* and *Maariv*, Israel’s major dailies. After receiving my change, I asked the shop clerk if she knew who Ben-Yehuda was. She was an artificial blonde, wearing an Adidas tracksuit that emphasized her hips and protruding belly. Her initial response was a smile, followed by a silence, behind which I detected hesitation. “Ben-Yehuda? It’s a street,” she replied.

“But who is it named after?”

“How should I know? Am I an encyclopedia?”

It took me no time to recognize that at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Israel was a sum of divergent selves. A thriving democracy, it was filled with McDonald’s, shopping malls, Internet cafés, and an abundance of other capitalist

symbols. Just like the United States, it was decadent in its embrace of leisure. In the hotel where I stayed, I saw a masseuse (I assume she was a prostitute) wearing a tank top with the American flag on it, one of its fifty stars replaced by a Star of David.

Nowodworski had told me that there are approximately eight million Hebrew speakers in the world today. Three-fourths of them are in Israel. The number would have made Ben-Yehuda proud. But in the international hierarchy of tongues it is microscopic. In the year 2000 Mandarin had a billion speakers, English five hundred million, Spanish four hundred million, and Hindi almost three hundred million. And yet, when placed along a trajectory that spans almost three millennia, the surging of Hebrew is nothing short of miraculous, especially when one considers that at the end of the nineteenth century the estimate of Hebrew speakers globally was not even a meager ten thousand.

The question is what kind of Hebrew is being used by its speakers. Like English, Hebrew is to be admired for its current plasticity. Successive waves of immigrants to Israel, Jewish and non-Jewish, have influenced its syntax. The dominance of Ashkenazic culture began to crumble in the fifties with arrivals from the former Ottoman Empire. Ethiopians, whose connection to Hebrew dates back to biblical times, came in the early eighties. The Sephardic accents of descendants of Jews expelled from Spain became essential ingredients. So did Mizrahi accents from what is known as the Levant, the geographical area within the Middle East south of the Taurus Mountains, bounded by the Mediterranean

Sea on the west, the northern Arabian Desert to the south, and the region that once was Upper Mesopotamia and is Iraq today on the east. Then came the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. A substantial number of Russian Jews made aliyah, infusing the language with Slavic terms.

In a country constantly defined by war, keeping in touch is a way to feel alive. Everywhere one looks, there are young soldiers. And the sound of ambulances doesn't appear to bother anyone. A rocket might have been thrown from Gaza. Tanks might have been mobilized near the West Bank. A suicide bomber might have been caught near a bus station. It's the pressure of living in a constant state of emergency. People just go about their business pretending everything is normal. And, indeed, this is normality for most of them.

That attitude among Israelis is admirable if unnerving. Literally everyone I spoke with while searching for Ben-Yehuda's past had some proximity to the threat of death: a wounded husband in the Sinai, a deceased daughter in a massacre in Haifa, a depressed friend unwilling to leave his apartment in Rehovot. Maybe this proximity is what gives the Israeli character what a Chicago-born sociologist I spoke to calls "the three r's": rawness, roughness, and rudeness. The realization that no matter what you do, how much you try to follow a routine, terror will come close to you one way or another makes Israelis impatient—not only with the world but with themselves. "Don't forget we're in the middle of the desert," she said. "The animals in the desert aren't known for their gentility. The dry environment has them in a constant state of alertness." She took a breath. "Being an Israeli turns you into a target. No matter where you go, if

you're sunbathing, backpacking, or simply applying for a job in a foreign country, you're always aware of it."

While the sociologist talked, I thought to myself that in this way Israelis are similar to the Jews in the Diaspora: they don't want to be confined to four walls, any four walls, no matter where they are. Their metabolism is at once centripetal and centrifugal.

During lunch in a fancy Tel Aviv shopping center, I ordered a leafy salad with multigrain bread and a carrot juice. The waitress who served me had an Iranian accent. She asked me where I had learned my Hebrew. I told her in Mexican schools.

"You mean Jewish schools, don't you?" she wondered.

I laughed. "Who else but Jews would want to speak it?"

She said she had been to Mexico not long ago. I later found out she fit into a pattern of young Israeli military recruits: once they complete their military service, they leave the country for a year. In the early nineties their destination of choice was India, especially Mumbai. Thousands of Israelis lived in ashrams in various provinces. In the late nineties Brazil became all the rage, though people also went to Mexico and some countries in Central America, such as Costa Rica and Ecuador. (They avoided Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala because of the political strife, and Honduras because it didn't have a tourist infrastructure.)

It isn't shocking to hear Spanish among twentysomething Israelis, an ungrammatical Spanish, impure, spontaneous. As it happens, shortly before, I had stopped at a branch of Steimatzky, a bookstore chain, and browsed through the travel section. There was a plethora of guides, all in Hebrew,

for inexpensive trips for a generation eager to escape the pressures of having to defend the country from its enemies every day of the year. Colombia is a destination, but, since a kidnapping of Israelis some years ago, it has been placed on the "to avoid" list. This isn't an exception. On an annual basis, there is an onslaught of tragic news coming from these countries: of Israelis suffering accidents or disappearing in Chile's Araucaria, Argentina's Patagonia, or Bolivia's Andean region. Several cases of AIDS have been connected with these destinations, especially with the Carnival season in Brazil, known for its promiscuity.

There are also positive aspects. In Quito, for instance, Israelis take Spanish-language lessons, which they show off when they return home. A few opt to stay forever, opening restaurants and other businesses. (In Mexico City, there's a Mediterranean restaurant called Falafel Benzona, a play on Hebrew words that, if translated into Spanish, would be the equivalent of Falafel Hijo de Puta, and in English Falafel Son of a Bitch. In Buenos Aires, a bar features the name Dak, a subtle play on *barak*, the Hebrew word for both a total mess and a brothel.) Mexican, Colombian, and Venezuelan *tele-novelas* are extremely popular in Israel. Some experts believe their popularity has to do not only with the melodramatic nature of the material but with the interest in Latin America of a young generation that has spent time there.

The waitress asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a teacher.

"Of what?"

"Literature," I replied.

Immediately, she recited for me in Hebrew a poem by Yehuda Amichai—here in an English translation by Chana Bloch:

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters
and the diameter of its effective range about seven
meters,

with four dead and eleven wounded.

And around these, in a large circle

of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered

and one graveyard. But the young woman

who was buried in the city she came from,

at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,

enlarges the circle considerably,

and the solitary man mourning the death

at the distant shores of a country far across the sea

includes the entire world in the circle.

And I won't even mention the howl of orphans

that reaches up to the throne of God and

beyond, making

a circle with no end and no God.

I was impressed. In how many countries does a waitress recite to you a poem about death? The fact that it was a poem by Amichai made it all the more significant to me because he was born in Würzburg, Germany, two years after Ben-Yehuda's death. He, too, came from a religious background. His family immigrated to Palestine in 1935, when he was eleven, and settled in Jerusalem a year later. Amichai's real name was Ludwig Pfeuffer. Like Ben-Yehuda, he re-

placed his given name with an invented one as an assertion of national identity. Amichai was among the first to use colloquial Israeli Hebrew in his poetry.

I asked the waitress if she had known him before he died in 2000. "He once came to our elementary school," she replied. "He recited his poems softly, without pretense, making everyone feel they wanted to be near him, to touch him, to fall in love with him."

That evening I went to the fashionable Performing Arts Center in Tel Aviv for a contemporary staging of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by the Cameri Theater troupe, known for its repertory of socially responsible plays. Directed by Omri Nitzan, the cast plays with rotating chairs and mingles with the audience, making the experience more immediate. Nitzan transported the rottenness in Denmark to an Israel that since the Six-Day War has been run by corrupt political leaders whose hands are covered in blood. I was impressed by the performance, but I was mesmerized and moved by the sheer chance to hear the Bard in Hebrew. The lucid translation was by T. Carmi, from the early eighties, but Carmi was far from the first to bring Shakespeare's play into Hebrew. One of the earliest efforts was by H. Y. Borenstein in Warsaw in 1926, followed by others in 1942 and 1944. For years the canonical translation of Shakespeare was Abraham Shlonsky's, released in Tel Aviv in 1946, although it is a well-known fact that Shlonsky's English was poor and that his translation was made using Russian and German parallel texts. Aside from Carmi's, whose version was a challenge to Shlonsky's hegemony, there's a translation by Aharon Komem and a more modern one by Avi Oz.

Given that Hebrew was officially linked to a national condition only in the middle of the twentieth century, the plethora of Hebrew *Hamlets* is nothing short of breathtaking. It sometimes seems as if Hebrew translators have been in a race to catch up with other modern languages. How many versions of the play are there in French? Just as many, I guess. And maybe fewer in the same span of time.

There were no professional theaters in Palestine in Ben-Yehuda's time. People were busy building a homeland. Yet it's intriguing to imagine him watching a Shakespeare play—in Hebrew. He would surely have been enthralled. According to lexicographic studies, the Bible has a vocabulary of approximately six thousand different words. Shakespeare uses a bank of around thirty-five thousand. That, in a nutshell, is Ben-Yehuda's dream of making the sacred tongue less constrained, more elastic, a language that could reflect the depth and complexity of life in seventeenth-century London, and of life today.

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I went out the next day looking for concrete traces of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda in Israel. My intention was to start with the museum dedicated to him.

There is no such thing, though. Nor are his houses open to visitors. Israel has sites dedicated to Bialik and Agnon. There are items from Ahad Ha-Am's workplace in a special collection at Tel Aviv's public library. But Ben-Yehuda appears