

- speechless: 2 events that drove
- WWII broke youth movement
- 90% on opt'n

- question of professionalization in field of Hebrewism in Am.
- 1/2 in high schools
- Jewish Pilsch

Mintz/AJS91/p. 1

AJS (Dec. 1991): TARBUT IVRIT

רבינו
גאון

Like the famous depiction of the shekhinah in Bialik's poem "Levadi," the once nurturing presence of Tarbut Ivrit has been driven from the spiritual house of American Jewish life; truly, kevar nitgarshah mikol hazaviyot. Even nostalgia for the heyday of Hebrewism in America is restricted to a modest circle of loyalists and veterans. The Hebrew colleges have largely been turned into Federation-sponsored adult education facilities; there are no more true Hebrew-speaking camps; and at almost all levels of Jewish education and Jewish studies, Hebrew is taught by Israeli immigrants. It would be false rhetoric to say that a once great movement has been humbled; Tarbut Ivrit was never that. But it does represent an experiment which is unique in American Jewish life, and its influence on Jewish education was enormous. Moreover, I would argue that there is much recoverable wisdom here for an American Jewry increasingly strung out between ritual piety and complacent ethnicity.

In other recent studies, I have examined the literary cultural aspects of how the Hebrew movement was formed in the World War One period, especially through the publication of literary journals. In my paper today, I wish to focus on the ideological component of Tarbut Ivrit (over a more extended span of time) as that component is separable from the actual activities and products of the movement, that is the institutions

it built and the literature it wrote. By ideology, I mean the self-conception of Tarbut Ivrit, the vision of Jewish culture it projected, and the way it defined its difference from other claimants to cultural hegemony on the American Jewish scene. And it is this American scene that makes the question intriguing. Tarbut Ivrit is of course an import; as an offspring of the Hebrew national revival in Eastern Europe at the end of the century, the idea was brought to America trailing its clouds of glory by idealistic young immigrants who hoped that American Jewry, because of its wealth and populousness, could sustain a center of Hebrew creativity. The mutations of this transplanted East European ideology in the particular soils of the American continent is the subject of these remarks.

In order to register the adaptations, one first needs to suggest something of the original ideology in its East European setting. And I would begin by arguing that in its origins, the ideology of Tarbut Ivrit is marked by a fundamental duality. On the one hand, there is Hebrew as nationalist banner. Every true nation has its own language as well as its own land. Hebrew is the language of the Jewish nation, and the surest sign of national reawakening is the emergence of a modern Hebrew literature. Exalted to the level of a divine manifestation among the maskilim, the Hebrew language in the nationalist period retains the aura of an inviolable ideal. It is the emergence of Yiddishism as a militant ideology in the first decade of the century which obliged the Hebraists to see themselves self-

consciously as such, that is as cultural and political actors whose struggles are defined by commitment to a language; and Hebrew in turn becomes the most visible symbol of a particular ideology.

Now, on the other hand, at the turn of the century there exists a different though related conception of Hebrew: Hebrew as cultural substance. Adopting the European concepts Kultur and civilization, Ahad Ha-am based his claims for the authority of Hebrew on its being the linguistic embodiment of the national spirit of the Jewish people over its long history. The emergence of modern Hebrew literature, which for the nationalists served as the great proof of Hebrew's ascendancy, was in Ahad Ha-am's eyes a very imperfect, if hopeful, development because it seemed like a poor thing compared with the grandeur of the great tradition. Because Yiddish so obviously lacked this lineage, Ahad Ha-am simply did not take the threat posed by it to Hebrew seriously; the squirmishes between the Hebraists and Yiddishists seemed interesting to him only as good material for a comic sketch or a feuilleton. Properly understood, Hebrew language and literature are nothing less than linguistic manifestations of the spiritual genius of the nation. To be sure, the language, like the nation, must continue to develop and adapt to new conditions; but the claims to its importance are based not on the uncertain first steps in the new direction (Haskalah and Tehiyyah literature) but on the great riches of the past for which Hebrew serves as a sure repository.

The duality we've described between Hebrew as nationalist banner and Hebrew as cultural substance explains a great deal, I would submit, about the career of Hebrew in our century. A fuller comparative discussion of the topic would trace the interplay between these positions in three crucial contexts between the world wars: the Yishuv in Eretz Yisrael, the Tarbut schools in Poland, and the Hebrew movement in America. Because of the constraints of the format this morning, I shall disentangle from this web the single stand of Hebrew ideology in America and attempt to offer a sketch of its development on our shores.

Now, the course of Tarbut Ivrit in America falls into two distinct periods. The first covers World War One and the the 1920s and early 30s and is marked by the founding of the journals Hatoren, Miklat and Hadoar, the formation of the Histadrut Ivrit and the establishment of a network of Hebrew colleges. The second period covers the late 30s and the 1940s, and is marked by the activity of the Histadrut Hanoar Ha'ivri, its journal Niv, and the founding of Camp Massad.

The ideal pursued during the first period was the establishment of a Hebrew cultural center in America, and given the populousness and wealth of American Jewry on the eve of World War One, this was not a quixotic aspiration. But what the nature of that center was to be was to was not agreed upon, and the disagreement broke down along the lines I've described above. On the one hand, there were Reuven Brainen, who presided over the

Histadrut Ivrit, and Menahem Ribalow of Hadoar and many others who carried the nationalist banner from Eastern Europe and planted ^{it} on American soil. For them, modern Hebrew literature, with Bialik as its exemplar, was the culmination of the Hebraist enterprise. Their ^{own} criteria for success ~~were~~ ^{were} the formation of a large readership for Hebrew literature that would support the publication of books and journals and the stimulation of original Hebrew belles-lettres written in America. As a voice within the cultural politics of American Jewish life, these Hebraists were the standard bearers of the prestige of Hebrew, and from their position of aristocratic entitlement, they took shots at the ^{sh}Yiddishts, the radicals, the assimilationists, the unlettered rabbis, and the English-language Jewish Publication Society.

In the envisioning and planning of centers for Hebrew culture in America, this was not the only direction. Such figures as Shimon Ginsberg, Moshe Halevy, Kalman Whiteman, Y. D. Berkovitch, Shimon Halkin, and Rav Tsa'ir represented a broader, more Ahad Ha-amist position which viewed Hebrew as the highest expression of the soul of catholic Israel over history. For them, Hebrew was less a cause and a banner than a cultural critique of Judaism and a point of departure for cultural criticism of the American Jewish community.

I now pass over both these groups rather hurriedly because of the fact that their influence on American Jewish life was rather negligible, and I state this with no joy or condescension. The principled commitment to communicating and creating in Hebrew

eliminated the very possibility of an audience for the case of Hebrew within an American Jewry in the throes of galloping Americanization. Yet there exists a substantial area in which Hebraism looked outward rather than inward and exerted an immense impact on American Jewish life; this is the area of Jewish education between the wars. I refer to the talmud torah movement, which, relative to the Reform Sunday school and the Orthodox yeshivah, was by far the greatest force in Jewish education during this period. The system of centralized talmud torahs and bureaus of Jewish education which spread throughout the major population centers of American Jewry is not a phenomenon which needs description here, though it is worth pausing over what I would call the wonder of it all. There is nothing to be taken for granted in the fact that a small and committed band of Hebraists, like a cadre of cultural commandos, fanned out over America and took a Jewish community, which essentially wanted its children only to be kept busy ^{and} be taught some basic synagogue skills, and imposed upon it an educational regime that was nationalist, Zionist, and Hebraist in nature. How this hijacking took place and through the collaboration of which interest groups in the community is an important question to which I admit having only an imperfect understanding at this time. But the phenomenon remains a striking one, and there is much here to be investigated. There is warrant here, for example, for a thesis that would argue that the later Zionization of American Jewry took place from the bottom up rather than from

the top down. That is to say tht the support for the Yishuv and the state is better explained by pointing to the leardership's exposure to a childhood curriculum saturated with attachment to Eretz Yisrael rather than by invoking factors of post-war guilt and the like.

It should come as no surprise by this point in my talk that I find within the talmud torah movement a fundamental duality between those who approached Hebrew as a broad Judaic worldview and those who took Hebrew as a world unto itself. The advancement of the first position is asociated with the activities of what are called the Benderly Boys. Born in Tsfat and trained as an ophamologist at Johns Hopkins, Samson Benderly left medicine for Jewish education and became the influential ^{head} of the Jewish education unit of the New York Kehillah. Benderly gathered around him a group of young men (including Alexander Dushkin, Isaac Berkson, Leo Honor, and M. G. Gamoran) who studied under Mordecai Kaplan and Israel Friedländer at the seminary--the Ahad Ha-am influence here is quite striking[≡] and completed doctorates in education with Dewey and Kirkpatrick at Columbia Teachers College. Each of these men early in ^{his} ~~their~~ career attained ^{of power} ~~powerful~~ positions in Jewish educational policy and had a great deal to do with the development of the talmud torah curriculum. Under their direction, the contours of that curricular philosophy took shape: a deep attachment to Eretz Yisrael and a romanticizing of the halutzic ideal; a commitment to Hebrew as the essential Jewish skill; a broadly secular

nationalist presentation of Jewish history; an accommodationist approach to synagogue life; a reinterpretation of the Jewish holidays stressing nationalist themes; and in ~~a~~ general a recuperation of the commandments as customs and ceremonies and folkways observed through song and drama.

Now there is much debate on the real influence of American progressive educational theory on this group, especially concerning the issues of democracy and child-centered learning. I tend to agree with Ronald Kronish's position that Dewey and Kirkpatrick were mainly used by figures like Berkson and Dushkin to lend legitimacy and an air of innovation to a Jewish educational philosophy which was not so different from the traditional goal of "conveying material," though it did so with a kinder face ^{and} up-to-date methods of control. For good or for ill, the true contribution of the Benderly group to what Walter Ackerman calls the Americanization of Jewish education was the ideological confirmation of the supplemental role of the afternoon school. This supplemental status was understood not merely as a concession to the dominant culture--a sort of rendering to Caesar what was Caesar's--but as an enriching augmentation, even a fulfillment, of American identity.

If we now turn our attention to another camp within the world of Hebrew education between the wars, we see that for this other group the supplemental status of the talmud torah was nothing more than a bitterly frustrating compromise and a failed appeasement of an aggrandizing American culture. I speak of such

figures as Zvi Scharfstein, H. A. Friedland, Moshe Feinstein, Nissan Touroff, Daniel Persky, and Kalman Whiteman, who toiled to preserve the integrity of Hebrew culture in America. These are the counterparts to the teachers in the Polish Tarbut schools and the truest standardbearers of the classical Tarbut Ivrit vision. For them the the Hebrew language, the Bible, and Hebrew literature constituted a kind of extra-territorial Jewish state, a virtual protable homeland, and this was reflected in the cultural autonomy (call it parochial or intentse, depending on your point of view) of the characteris^{HC} educational institution created by the Hebraists: the Hebrew teachers college. But the Hebraist educators worked not only as professors in the relative comfort of the Hebrew colleges but also as teachers and principals in the field and in the trenches, that is in the provincial Hebrew schools throughout America. To know the passionate commitment and heroic loneliness of such men as Zvi Plich, who taught me in Worcester MA, was to have known a unique figure in the landscape of spiritual leadership in American Jewish life.

So much for our survey of the tensions within Tarbut Ivrit between the world wars. A distinctly new phase of Hebraist ideological activity begins in the 30s and continues through to the post-war period; it is associated with the Histadrut Hanoar Ha'ivri, its journal Niv, and the cultural activities of a new generation of largely American-born Hebraists, including Jacob Kabakoff, Moshe Davis, Sylvia Culter Ettenberg, Gerson D. Cohen,

Milton Arfa, Haim Leaf, T. Carmi, Alan Mandelbaum and Shlomo Shulsinger. By way of transition, allow me to adduce two interesting documents. The first is a long programmatic treatise on the philosophy of Hebrew education by Nissan Touroff, who to my mind is the most articulate exponent of the Hebrew nationalist approach in America; the essay appeared in 1944 in the Sefer hayovel shel agudat hamorim benu york usevivoteha. The article is a well reasoned defense of the postulates of Hebraism against the heightened demand during the war years for a curriculum which concentrates on the values of American democracy. The whole rationale of Hebraic education, according to Touroff, is to bring a student to a level where he or she knows Hebrew well enough to be able to read freely in the primary sources of Judaism and Jewish history in order to extract, and embody, the highest values of the national spirit, what Ahad Ha-am called the hamussar hale'umi. ^{the} Tragic dimension of Touroff's conception is the fact that, by his own admission, the reality of American life makes this ideal impossible of attainment. All the years of hard work in mastering Hebrew inevitably turn out to be an abandoned path, and the crowning rationale that would justify the investment never arrives. In other words, the promise of unlimited access to Hebrew as substance is defeated in the American milieu by the grinding demands of Hebrew as discipline and technique, with its limited intermediate rewards.

Touroff was one of the finest representatives of the older Hebrew educators; the second document I wish to adduce was

written one of the most creative of the younger educators, Shlomo Shulsinger, the founder Camp Massad. In Niv in 1944 Shulsinger wrote observantly about the fundamental division (familiar to us by now, I think) between veteran Hebrew educators, ^{who} are totally committed to Hebrew and Eretz Yisrael and attempt to run their schools like islands within American society, and the progressives, who have allowed Hebrew culture to be adapted to American life. He criticizes the shortcomings of both groups, and although his sympathy lies with the veteran Hebraists, he singles out their failure on the crucial issue of religion. Rather than forthrightly carrying out their nationalist critique of religion, they avoided the issue in order not to stir up the surface piety of parents and rabbis; by so doing they ended up teaching the traditional religious materials in the curriculum in a dry and mechanical way, to the detriment of both the students and the tradition.

Shulsinger's critique points to some of the departures of the second phase of Tarbut Ivrit from the first. Time does not permit a respectable survey of this second phase, and I hope to make up for the lack at another time. In closing, I wish only to list some of the crucial new directions.

1. A decentering of literature as the dominant mode of creativity in Hebrew and a search for Hebrew expression in drama, music, and dance, together with a general desire to connect Hebrew to a lived cultural matrix.

2. A more self-conscious engagement with the issues raised

by the success of the Yishuv and the consequent meaning of Hebrew culture in the diaspora. This involved a deliberate stance of hiyyuv hagolah (influenced by Rawidowicz's thinking), in opposition to most all other groups in this/the great age of Zionist youth movements in America. Nevertheless, there was a kind of commitment to a halutzic ideal, and ⁿif fact a number of key figures, such as Moshe Davis and T. Carmi, made aliyah as an outgrowth of the search for a fuller and more natural setting for Hebrew.

3. The positive contribution of religion and the observance of the commandments to Hebrew culture was formally affirmed for the first time, although it never became defined as the foundation of Jewish experience.

4. There was a universalist thrust, propounded most urgently by the young Gerson Cohen, zikhrono levrakhah, which called upon Hebrew youth to take stands toward issues of social justice and war and peace as well as toward Jewish causes proper.

The ^{cultural} moment of Niv & the Hahinukh did not last long, and had I time I would show how the movement ended by developing into ~~stands~~ the two directions we have been speaking about. Moshe Davis & G. Cohen → ~~the~~ shared ~~the~~ Hebrew as the key to civilization, while Shulzinger & David shared Hebrew as nationalist culture. But that is a story for another time.