

ראש השנה א' תשע"ח  
ROSH HASHANAH I 5778  
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This morning's Torah reading began on a note of *simhah*, with the long-awaited birth of Isaac. Like so many occasions of joy, this one leads to complications, among them, the rivalry between half-brothers Isaac and Ishmael and their mothers Sarah and Hagar in today's reading; and in the continuation of the portion, read tomorrow, God's command to Abraham to bring his beloved son Isaac to Moriah as a sacrifice.

It is noteworthy that of all the patriarchs, it is Isaac who has the least to say. Not until our reading tomorrow, not until the *Akeidah* episode, is a single word of speech attributed in the Torah to Isaac. It is on the third day of their journey to Moriah that Isaac finally speaks: "הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאֵיךְ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה. אָבִי, Father... I see we have the fire, the wood, but what about the sheep for the offering?" So Isaac's very first word recorded in the Torah is "אָבִי, father," as he seeks to understand his place in that event shrouded in mystery and uncertainty.

Follow me to another father-son episode, geographically very close to the Abraham-Isaac encounter in the vicinity of Jerusalem, but separated by at least three thousand years of history. Here too, the very first recorded word of father-to-son, indeed, the very first word ever spoken by the son, at the age of three, was "אָבִי, Father." But here some back-story is required.

Ben-Zion Ben Yehuda, the first-born son of Dvora and Eliezer ben Yehuda, born in Jerusalem in 1882, would become known as הילד העברי הראשון, the first Hebrew-speaking child. When newlyweds Eliezer and Dvora reached the shores of Palestine a year earlier, they committed themselves, at Eliezer's insistence, to speak only Hebrew in their home. For Dvora, that meant silence, because she could not speak a word of Hebrew. Perhaps, as his own form of protest, their toddler son did not speak his first word until the age of three. Evidently, young Ben-Zion's first words were

precipitated when his father angrily berated Dvora for singing a Russian lullaby, and violating their Hebrew-only rule. Eliezer's screaming rage startled their son, who then spoke his first words: "אבא, אבא – Father, Father!"<sup>1</sup>

Three thousand years separating them, but, geographically, in walking distance from each other. Isaac, the son of Abraham; and Ben-Zion, the son of Eliezer, call out "אבי, אבא – Father, Father." Isaac, perplexed by the one crucial element that his meticulous father neglected to pack for their journey, perhaps sensing the uncertainty of his future, his fear coming to the surface, breaks his Biblical silence with his opening word: "אבי - My Father."

Ben-Zion, rightfully upset at his father's mistreatment of his mother, breaks his silence by calling out his father, sensing that something unusual, something strange, had been imposed on him, on his mother, perhaps understanding that he would be like no other child of the *First Aliyah*, that he would speak a language none of the other neighborhood children would understand, that he would have no friends, that he would live a lonely childhood. All of this comes to pass, making it clear that Eliezer ben Yehuda would never earn parent-of-the-year honors, that, as Abraham did to Isaac, Eliezer would subject his precious first-born son to trial and tribulation, for what was, in each father's view, a higher goal.

Of course, the story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the most widely known in the world, not only the subject of our Torah readings today and tomorrow, but a motif that has captured the imagination of writers, poets, artists, philosophers of all ages, of many faith traditions. The story of Eliezer and Ben-Zion Ben Yehuda, with a far smaller profile, deserves to be better known, because it says so much about what it means to be a Jew today, and the miracle that continues to unfold before our eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew*, Princeton, 2017, p. 189

Ben-Zion, who in his teens would change his name to Itamar ben-Avi, and who would achieve prominence as a linguist, journalist, writer and Zionist leader in his own right, eventually made peace with his difficult childhood and embraced his status as הילד העברי הראשון, the first Hebrew-speaking child, the first of millions of children who would be born in Israel, whose first words, like Ben-Zion, would be Hebrew, who would talk, joke, argue, dream in a language that had not been spoken in thousands of years, but who now, thanks to his father and others who joined him in his efforts, would be part of a linguistic revival unparalleled in human history. And unlike the child Ben-Zion, who had no friends who could speak his language, the generations of Israeli children to follow would bring a vibrant spoken Hebrew to the playgrounds, the schoolyards, the meeting-places of Israel, with no shortage of friends with whom to dialogue in the very language spoken, so very long ago, in the earliest moments of our very long history, by Abraham and Isaac.

Like all the early Zionist figures of the late nineteenth-century, Eliezer ben Yehuda was subject to scorn and ridicule, even by his fellow Zionists who could not understand his passion for a return to Hebrew as a spoken language, and as the official language of the Jewish state-to-be. No less a Zionist than Theodor Herzl thought the choice of Hebrew as the official language was absurd. How, he wondered, could they choose Hebrew, when none of them were able, in his words, “to ask for a railway ticket in that language.... We cannot converse with one another in Hebrew.”<sup>2</sup> Herzl wanted the language of the Jewish state he envisioned to be German, while others preferred Yiddish. But Ben Yehuda was adamant, Hebrew was to be the spoken language of the Jewish state. In his memoirs, he recalled how, while still in his youth, “I heard a mighty voice within me calling: ‘The rebirth of the Jews and their language on ancestral soil,’”<sup>3</sup> an idea he expanded suggesting, in his words, that “the Hebrew language will go from the synagogue to the house of study, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ilan Stavans, *Resurrecting Hebrew*, Nextbook, 2008, p. 29

<sup>3</sup> Glinert, p. 188

from the house of study to the school, and from the school it will come into the home ... and become a living language.”<sup>4</sup>

In this 70<sup>th</sup> year in the life of the State of Israel it is easy to lose sight of Eliezer ben Yehuda's contribution, in light of the spectacular achievements of the State of Israel in its relatively very short span of existence. A center of technological, medical, scientific, agricultural, educational expertise second to none in the world, whose accomplishments in so many fields never cease to amaze, causing one to forget for an instant that all this has happened while Israel has fought an unending conflict with tenacious adversaries seeking her destruction – Israel's myriad accomplishments, her relentless strategic challenges notwithstanding, seemingly dwarf the contributions of a Ben Yehuda so many years earlier.

But I, for one, am in awe of what Eliezer ben Yehuda achieved more than a century ago. How this young man, still in his twenties, could sense the power of capturing the language spoken millennia earlier by patriarchs and prophets, and transforming that ancient tongue into a dynamic, contemporary language that would bridge Torah and technology, that would infuse the incredibly difficult struggle to build a new state with the very vocabulary that framed the sacred texts that had held us together from the earliest of our times and throughout our long and challenging history – how this young man, more than a century ago, could bring to life words so long relegated to the hand-copied or printed page, can only be seen as one of the great transformative events of human history.

Several years back, when my esteemed colleague Rabbi Erwin Schild retired as Senior Rabbi of our neighboring Adath Israel Congregation, his congregation commissioned a Sefer Torah to be written in his honor. At the dedication of the Torah, Rabbi Schild reflected on his memory of *Kristalnakht*, when synagogues and Jewish institutions across Germany were destroyed as a frightening prelude to the

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<sup>4</sup> Stavans, p. 42

even darker days to follow. Rabbi Schild recalled being a *yeshivah* student, standing with his classmates outside their yeshivah as it was being raided by Nazi hordes, witnessing *Sifrei Torah* thrown out of the windows, and burned in front of their eyes. He saw the new *Sefer Torah*, written in his honor, as replacing one of those whose destruction he had witnessed that dark November day in 1938.

Think of all of the burning of sacred texts that occurred during the Shoah, and that have occurred throughout our history. The earliest complete edition of the Babylonian Talmud in existence today, the Munich Manuscript, was produced in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, some eight centuries after the completion of that essential rabbinic compilation. That there are no earlier complete sets, other than scattered fragments and volumes reflects the number of book burnings that occurred throughout the middle ages, depriving us of so many significant sacred texts.

*Kibbutz Lohamei HaGetaot*, the *Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz*, founded by survivors of Jewish resistance to the Nazis in Polish and Lithuanian ghettos, in its museum, houses a beautifully written document in what appears to be a ledger-book. Looking at it closely, you realize that it is written in Torah-script. Reading its words, you discover that they are familiar to you, and you realize that you are viewing a prayer book. The dedication to the Siddur identifies its writer as Moshe Borochowicz and sheds light on his story.

Moshe Borochowicz, of Zelichow, near Warsaw, had lost his entire family. Moshe, alone, was hiding in a bunker. With him was his one surviving possession, a page-worn Siddur. Cut off from the world as he was, knowing that his family was already lost among the millions of his people murdered, he feared that he could be the last Jew left alive, and his Siddur, the last sacred Jewish article remaining. He knew that his Siddur would not last much longer. It was falling apart. In his terrifying isolation, nothing frightened him more than the thought that the world could be left without a Siddur, without a solitary sacred Hebrew text. There, with the less-than-choice

writing materials at hand, in his bunker, cut off from the world, Moshe painstakingly wrote out a prayer book. Between some of the prayers, and, within certain prayers themselves, he included the names of his martyred family members. His Siddur was his gift to their memory, his legacy to the world. He would insure that there would be at least one surviving Hebrew prayer book.

Moshe did not live to see the rest of the story. He did not know that, surrounding the building where his Siddur would be preserved, would be the beautiful green fields of a thriving Jewish homeland. He could not have known that not only would his prayer book **not** be the last Siddur on earth, but that, today, there would be more Hebrew publishing houses in Israel today producing prayer books, Hebrew texts, Hebrew literature, Hebrew poetry, than in all of cumulative Jewish history until now.

Rabbi Schild, in his youth, had reason, because of what he experienced, because of what he witnessed, to fear the long-term effect of sacred Hebrew text going up in flames. Thankfully, Rabbi Schild lived to see the resurgence of Jewish life, of Hebrew creativity reflected in the establishment of the State of Israel, and to see new *Sifrei Torah*, new Hebrew texts, Hebrew newspapers, Hebrew theater, Hebrew cinema, affirming that the language of our earliest ancestors was ever alive and ever reflective of the eternity of the Jewish spirit and the Jewish soul.

Eliezer ben Yehuda understood the importance of language as underpinning the Jewish future. He knew the sacred language of the Jewish past, transformed into the working language of the Jewish present, would bring together past, present and future in a way fully in keeping with our tradition as עם הספר, the people of the Book, who have always cherished the word, the transmission of meaningful text from one generation to the next. It was no accident that the first totally new Jewish city, Tel Aviv, established 110 years ago, derived its name from a book, not, what one would have expected, the other way around. When Nahum Sokolov translated Theodor Herzl's novel *Altneuland* from its original German into Hebrew, he rendered

*Altneuland*, Old-New Land, as *Tel Aviv*, a name that appears in Ezekiel (3:15), but more significantly, reflects the archaeological term *Tel*, calling to mind an ancient civilization, and *Aviv*, meaning spring, rebirth, revival.

As we embark on this year of milestone anniversaries in the history of the Jewish state; seventy years of independence, fifty years since the reunification of Jerusalem, one-hundred and twenty years since the First Zionist Congress in Basel, one hundred years since the Balfour Declaration offered a major world power's support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, one cannot avoid the fact that Israel is not without more than its share of problems, challenges and struggles. Its presence in a hostile neighborhood never allows for complacency or lessening of military preparedness, even though, today, Israel is truly one of the safest places on earth, because of its intelligent approach to security. Israel struggles with relentless hostility world-wide, as even our Canadian labor unions and Church groups adopt BDS resolutions, masking their cluelessness as to the reality Israel confronts and the desire of the vast majority of Israelis and their leaders to make peace and even concessions were there to be found a partner with whom to negotiate such an agreement.

It was 120 years ago last month that Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. It was after that congress that Herzl penned his famous words: "At Basle, I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years, and certainly, in fifty years, everyone will know it is true."

Well, Herzl was off, but not by much. It did take more than 50 years for the Jewish State to be recognized, in fact three months more. Fifty years and three months after he wrote those words, November 29, 1947, the U.N. voted to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. And fifty years and nine months after he wrote those words, on Friday afternoon, May 5, 1948, David Ben Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel.

But if you study the records of that First Congress, 120 years ago, and subsequent Congresses (I have had the privilege of being a delegate at the last two), you will note considerable disagreement among delegates, lots of argument, lots of angry words, but all in Hebrew, thanks to Eliezer Ben Yehuda. Herzl recorded his frustration on his inability to secure agreement among the delegates on many core issues concerning the Zionist movement and the future State.

And if you ever had the pleasure, that I have had on many occasions, and as recently as this past summer, to attend meetings or sessions in Israel's Knesset, you know that all is not peace and harmony. Vigorous argument is the order of the day. And we continue to argue the case for religious pluralism and recognition of the religious streams in Israel in addition to Orthodoxy, including our own Masorti movement, which brings together the Zionist vision and a commitment to an inclusive, tolerant, old-new interpretation of our tradition, challenging those who view the hallowed sources of our tradition as incompatible with a modern understanding of a just, open, egalitarian society.

Differing views of the nature of the Jewish State are nothing new. Theodor Herzl, even before he banged the gavel 120 years ago to open the First Zionist Congress, faced divergent opinions, as he did every day that he pursued his dream. He understood that not even the fulfillment of his vision, the establishment of the Jewish State, would bring to an end internal conflict and passionate disagreement on an unending list of issues.

But we know, as did Herzl, as did his contemporary, Eliezer Ben Yehuda, and so many of the other visionaries of those days, we know that our points of disagreement, on occasion, will not diminish our relentless advocacy for Israel, our speaking out when others, rooted in hostility, ignorance, and antipathy to the Middle East's only democracy, seek to depict Israel as the source of all the world's evil, as if the moral

outrages committed in Syria and throughout the Arab world, as if all of the mass killings and human rights abuses in the countries that surround Israel, were insignificant when compared to the protective border fence that Israel installed in its largely successful attempt to deter murderous terrorist attacks. We will not be deterred in our advocacy for Israel, just as our wonderful young adults studying on college campuses, are not deterred by the relentless barrage of anti-Israel hostility they confront, when supposed centers of learning are transformed by unquestionably anti-Semitic forces into bastions of ignorance, when it comes to Israel, and its fundamental core of human decency, which they maliciously misrepresent.

Why are we not deterred in our advocacy for Israel, in our relentless support for her, in our standing up against those who defame Israel at every opportunity, who seek to deny Israel standing in the company of nations? Why would we never consider denying Israel our love, our visits, our financial support, even when we may disagree with a government action, or object to religious policy?

I would go back, in answering these questions, to Eliezer Ben Yehuda, to the miracle he facilitated, of rebirthing our sacred ancient language, into a modern, spoken tongue. I would go back to Theodor Herzl, who, 120 years ago, set in motion the return of our people, after a 2000-year absence, to the geographic map of history. Yes, we will argue policy, often with passion, because that's what Jews do. Yes, we will disagree with each other, often, and loudly. We're good at that. But standing high above all those arguments and disagreements is our appreciation that **נס גדול היה** **פה**, that, in our day, a great miracle happened, bringing together ancient past and the modern world, bringing to life an ancient language, bringing to land a stateless people. We, the generations privileged to be living that miracle, will allow nothing or nobody to stand in our way of savoring that sacred opportunity.

Finally, a story, shared with me by a close friend, experienced on his return to Jerusalem, late at night from an overseas trip. Asher, at the time, was saying *Kaddish* for his mother, and was hoping to find a *Ma'ariv minyan* upon his trip home from the airport. He asked his taxi driver if he knew of a synagogue that would have a late *Ma'ariv* service. Sensing that his driver was secular, because he wasn't wearing a kippah, he knew the odds of the driver knowing of a *minyan* were slim, but he figured he would ask, anyhow.

“אתה צריך מניין?” the driver asked, “You need a *minyan*?”

“כן, yes,” Asher answered.

“אל תדאג,” his *nahag*, his driver assured him. “Don't worry.” Asher wasn't sure what the driver had in mind, but they continued on the climb up the steep highway to Jerusalem. Shortly after entering the city, the driver pulled his taxi to the side of the road, took a well-worn kippah out of his glove compartment, got out of the cab, and told my friend, “תחכה רגע, wait a minute.” The driver then proceeded to flag down eight cars, got the drivers to come out of their cars, brought them together, to make a late-night *minyan* on a Jerusalem sidewalk.

Where else could this happen, if not in Israel? The same land that bore witness to the revival of an ancient language, to the return of a dispersed nation, would be the land where a total stranger would bring together a *minyan* of strangers, to be no longer strangers but fellow Jews on a mission, that of standing by each other at that moment of need, enabling true *kaddish*, true *kedushah* to triumph, in a world where holiness can often be hard to track down, as envisioned in words we will read in tomorrow's Haftarah: “יש תקוה לאחרייתך... ושבנו בנים לגבולם” – There is hope for your descendants, because they will return to their land.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 31: 16