

# **THE STRUGGLE FOR THE HEBREW LANGUAGE IN PALESTINE**

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The Struggle for the Hebrew Language in Palestine by Various

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**VARIOUS**

**THE STRUGGLE FOR THE  
HEBREW LANGUAGE IN  
PALESTINE**



The Struggle for the  
"Hebrew Language in Palestine"

ISSUED IN GERMAN

BY THE

ACTIONS COMMITTEE OF THE ZIONIST ORGANIZATION

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## THE STRUGGLE FOR THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

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The events of the past three months (November, 1913—January, 1914) have precipitated the Jewish people into a conflict over the Hebrew language.

On the one side in this struggle is Palestine, the new Palestine, active, energetic, confident of its future. Its live city population is on this side, the whole of its educated class, the laborers and settlers in all the Jewish colonies, the school-teachers, sober-minded men of experience who have devoted their lives to the revival of Hebrew, and their pupils, young people eager to live a Jewish life in the spirit of their models. It is the side that is upheld by the Zionist organization, which stands solid on this issue, ready for any sacrifice.

On the other side are the leading personages in the *Hilfsverein* of the German Jews.

Dr. Paul Nathan, head of the *Hilfsverein*, is mainly responsible for the policy of that body. He placed himself in opposition to the clearly expressed will of the people of Palestine, and in a pamphlet of his entitled "Palestine and Palestinian Zionism," he bitterly attacked the Zionist movement and its responsible representatives.

To us this great struggle signifies more than a mere polemical controversy with Dr. Nathan. The best way, in our opinion, to defend ourselves is to show objectively what the revival of the Hebrew language in Palestine signifies for the whole of Judaism and Jewry, what role it plays in the development of education in Palestine, and how the conflict over the school system has arisen.

The best answer is the truth.

The struggle over the Hebrew language has assumed a particularly acute character in Germany. There the opponents of Zionism have united into an anti-Zionist alliance, which finds no methods too base to use in fighting Zionism. Dr. Paul Nathan and

Dr. James Simon have allied themselves with this "anti-Zionist Committee," and put their signatures to the statement against Zionism which that Committee published in the advertising columns of the German dailies.

Such methods of warfare cannot, however, deter us on our part from conducting the campaign for Hebrew with clean weapons. Zionism need not resort to these methods of the desperate. Pure and strong, it can afford to disdain them.

### THE REVIVAL OF HEBREW

When in 1880 Eliezer Ben Jehuda, then living in Paris, published an article in the Hebrew paper in Jerusalem, *Ha-Haba-zelet*, demanding the use of Hebrew as the language of intercourse at least in the Talmudic schools in Jerusalem, the editor commented: "Of course the author is right. Only, as they say, it is a 'pious wish.'" But Ben Jehuda was not content to let it remain a pious wish. In the first place he insisted that Hebrew should be spoken in his own household. Then in 1882 he went to live in Jerusalem, where he rigidly adhered to his rule of speaking nothing but Hebrew. His example was the more readily followed as Hebrew met a natural need of the Jews in Palestine. Here came Jews from all parts of the world requiring a language in common; and Hebrew was the only one in which each could understand the other. Ben Jehuda now showed that it was necessary to convert this "universal, auxiliary" language into the language of ordinary intercourse. Since Hebrew at that time did not possess a vocabulary rich enough for the needs of everyday life, Ben Jehuda created new words, or, rather, he searched the whole of Hebrew literature for words that could be adapted to common usage. The outcome of his work was the first large comprehensive dictionary of the Hebrew language, the *Thesaurus totius hebraicitatis*, now being published by Langenscheidt in Berlin. It was in the same spirit that J. M. Pines had previously, in 1879, agitated for the establishment of Hebrew colonies.

From a few private families this tendency spread to several associations—B'nai B'rith of Palestine, for example—which made it a principle that nothing but Hebrew be spoken at their meetings and sessions. Numerous communal institutions also adopted the



practice of having the speeches delivered at their meetings in Hebrew alone.

Yet it was chiefly the new schools in the cities and colonies that were destined to pave the way for the adoption of Hebrew as the language of the Jews in Palestine.\* It was highly important for the development of Hebrew in Palestine that the schools became more and more imbued with the principle of training the children to its use in conversation and employing it exclusively or partly as the medium of instruction in all branches. In the case of the older children, who understood Hebrew, even if they had only a book knowledge of it, it was comparatively easy to accustom them to its familiar use. Greater difficulties presented themselves with the younger children. For them the so-called "ibrit be-ibrit" method was invented. The first to present it in text books were some of the teachers in Palestine, among them Isaac Epstein and David Yellin. By this method the little children are taught Hebrew, not through translation, but by the consistent use of the language itself with the aid of object lessons.

In Hebrew as a living language the pupils received instruction in general as well as Jewish subjects. At first, it is true, progress was not great. The children came to school from homes where Yiddish or Ladino was spoken, so that Hebrew had to be conveyed to their minds as a new language. Since the schools exercised no essential influence upon the families, the children reverted to their mother tongue in their homes.

This became less of a difficulty when Hebrew Froebel kindergartens were instituted and children as young as three and four were reached. Here the little ones, with no language as yet coming ready to their tongues, hear nothing but Hebrew. The teachers talk, sing, play, dance with them, all in Hebrew. Within two or three months they begin to speak it, and since they spend nearly the whole day in the kindergarten, they learn no other language and are even obliged to use it at home with their parents and relatives. Thus, as a matter of fact, the young exert a great influence upon the parents. For who does not love his child enough to try to reply to it in the language it understands?

The kindergartens produced Hebrew rhymes and songs, and through the children and their songs Hebrew penetrated to the

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\* The question of the development of education will be dealt with later.

Jewish masses in Palestine. Thus the Hebraizing of Palestine has proceeded apace, which a few conscious nationalists, beginning with the family of Ben Jehuda down to the teachers of the Hebrew gymnasium in Jaffa, had striven for devotedly and had finally realized.

Hebrew once more became the living tongue of the Jews in Palestine, the medium of their daily intercourse. It also became a language of modern civilization. The young people of Palestine to-day are thoroughly Hebrew. Hundreds of Jewish children from Palestine and other countries are trained in the gymnasia of Jaffa and Jerusalem and in the schools of the colonies, and our ancient language is made the basis for a synthesis of Jewish and modern culture. The necessity of taking account of the Hebrew language is recognized even by non-Jews. The Austrian post office in Palestine issues printed notices in Hebrew, and the German consul in his official trade report of the German industries recommends that the Germans make use of Hebrew in conducting their publicity campaigns, as was being done in behalf of industries by other countries.

Since there are more than 50,000 Jews in Palestine that understand Hebrew, Hebrew literature and the Hebrew press there have made prodigious progress. There are Hebrew dailies and weeklies. There are juvenile, pedagogical, agricultural and medical periodicals in Hebrew. There are Hebrew publishing houses fairly well equipped and Hebrew libraries freely used. Even lectures and dramatic productions are given in Hebrew. All of which indicates clearly the pulsating spiritual life that has arisen from the revival of the Hebrew tongue.

This unparalleled growth is the result of a combination of practical elements, ideal elements, and a conscious national will.

The effect of the revival of Hebrew in Palestine has already been felt beyond its boundaries. In the countries where there are large masses of Jews, the Hebrew language began to renew itself several decades ago. To be sure, it was never in reality a dead language. Until a hundred years ago in Germany and about thirty years ago in Russia, it was a self-understood matter with a large majority of Jews that all business transactions, book-keeping and correspondence be carried on in Hebrew. That there have been Hebrew dailies in Russia for more than twenty-five years is a well-known fact.

For those who do not understand Hebrew it would be futile to recount the names of the numerous poets, novelists and essayists who have contributed to the wealth of Hebrew literature in our day. The renown of only a few of them has as yet penetrated beyond the circle of Hebrew readers, not because the others lack merit, but because those who might be expected to interpret the Hebrew poets and scholars in other languages have until now failed to concern themselves with the fate of modern Hebrew literature. Nevertheless, there is at least one man who has become known among a large number of German, French, and English-speaking Jewish readers, Ahad ha-Am, the clear, keen thinker and brilliant stylist, of whom a non-Jew, the well-known professor of philosophy Masaryk says, that the knowledge of his work is indispensable to a comprehension of present-day Judaism. The poems of Bialik have also been translated, into German, Russian and Italian. Another fact of significance is that the Hebrew literature of to-day possesses a large number of translations of the modern classics of other languages. Frischman has rendered Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra," into Hebrew, and Hauptmann, Tolstoy, Hamsun have appeared in Hebrew in whole or in part. In Jaffa, a publishing house, Yefet, has been established solely for the purpose of issuing translations, while the publishing house Turgeman in Odessa has issued in Hebrew the juvenile classics of all the nations.

Though the development of neo-Hebraic literature began in Russia, it finds its mainstay and its future in Palestine. Years ago, a Hebrew author, Brainin, wrote a melancholy sketch, "In the Nursery," in which he showed how his own children talked and played in a strange tongue. They pressed their father with questions and pleaded with him not to write in Hebrew, a language they did not understand. He concluded the sketch with the sad lines: "Life has gone against me. I or life—who will conquer—?"

Brainin lived outside of Palestine. All over the world, life is opposed to Hebrew, and the only way it can maintain itself is by constant conflict with the demands of the times. In Palestine, however, it does not come into conflict with the demands of life; on the contrary life demands it. There it can and will develop, and its development will benefit the Jews of other lands. Whether we, who are outside of Palestine, shall or shall not speak Hebrew, we must at least, if we wish to remain Jews, understand Hebrew;