Conflicting Images of Hebrew in Western Civilization

The secularization of Hebrew since the eighteenth century represents a major cultural turning point in Jewish history. The uses of Hebrew until the modern period were largely determined by the identity of the Jews as the only religious minority tolerated in Christian Europe and by the theocratic character of the countries where most Jews lived. Hebrew served Judaism primarily as the Holy Tongue (leshon ha-Kodesh) until the late nineteenth century. The fragmentation and conflicts of identity which have come to characterize the Jewish people are expressed in their Hebrew culture since the time of the French Enlightenment: in orthodox rabbinic Judaism, which preserved Hebrew in a unique educational system for two thousand years, against which assimilated Jews rebelled from the eighteenth century onward; as a stimulus toward assimilation itself, for which increasingly modernized Hebrew came to serve as a tool in the Haskalah (Enlightenment) movement, only to become obsolete (as did Yiddish, the main daily language of the European Jews prior to the Holocaust) as emancipated Jews mastered European languages and began to function primarily in them; as part of the foundation of the Western civilization – via Christianity and translations of the Hebrew Bible in the vernacular – into which most European Jews assimilated; as the ideological basis of secular nationalism in the idea, rooted in the Hebrew Bible, of a “chosen people” and a national community united by ancient, sacred cultural bonds; and Zionism and the re-establishment of a Jewish state whose living culture was modern Hebrew, uniting the European (Ashkenazic) and Oriental (Sephardic) Jews.¹ This is the sole instance of an ancient minority language and political entity restored in the modern period.

Not least significant in this highly varied and complex picture are negative perceptions of Hebrew on the part of Jewish creative writers

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and thinkers. Such views begin among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European, particularly German, writers such as Marx, Freud, and Kafka; they become prevalent among American writers born prior to the Second World War, such as Henry Roth, Charles Reznikoff, Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow, Woody Allen, and Philip Roth; and they diminish after the war. This is evidently an unusual, if not unique, sociological phenomenon, the significance of which has not been sufficiently appreciated.

Modern Hebrew has had mercurial value in comparison with its more iron-clad pre-modern identity. It has mostly withered in a variety of majority cultures, involved multiple meanings and cultural cross-currents, and reflected many aspects of individual and collective social psychology. Hebrew is a majority culture only in Israel, where it has flourished since 1948, though many of the great modern Hebrew writers were born in Europe. In the diaspora, Hebrew often appears less a living culture than a sociological phenomenon, a site of the clash between Jewish tradition and assimilation in modern societies. This chapter begins by considering the traditional Jewish perception of Hebrew as the Holy Tongue; then Hebrew as the basis of Western civilization, particularly in England; the ambiguously stimulating and deadening effects of emancipation on Hebrew, converting the sacred tongue into a dispensable educational tool; consequent ambivalence toward Hebrew among modern Jewish writers; anti-Semitism as a cause both of the revival of Hebrew among Jewish nationalists and the suppression of Hebrew among assimilationists.

Traditional views of Hebrew

For most of Jewish history, the rabbinic view of Hebrew has predominated: it is the sacred language of humanity, the language in which God created the world and gave the Law to the Jewish people (Epstein 1959, de Lange 1987). It is the language of the three most influential books in Jewish history – the Bible, the Mishnah, and Siddur (prayer book). The Hebrew Bible was the defining characteristic of the Jews – the “People of the Book” – the ancient pagan world. It was “something to which none of the other ethnic groups in the Near East possessed any equivalent” (Millar 1993, p. 337). As a minority language in an often-hostile environment, Hebrew was a weapon of resistance. Particularly after the failure of the three Jewish revolts against Rome, in 66–70, 115–17, and 132–35 CE, Hebrew became vital to Jewish survival:

The struggle of the Jewish people against Greek and Roman domination was accompanied by a literature which encouraged and