

The Linguistic Aspect of Zionism

BY LEO SHPALL

LANGUAGE, according to John Dewey, "is the distinctive characteristic of a human being. He lives in a world not of mere things, mere existences, but of things and existences that signify, that have meanings, that denote eventualities, that rouse hopes and expectations, tell of dangers and fears, achievements and fulfillments." Language is our means of communication and is thus a potent factor in the life of man. What holds good of individuals with regard to language also holds good of nationalities, ethnic groups and races. Every nationality cherishes its language because the customs and traditions are expressed in it, and because it is important in bringing about a similar way of thinking.

A nationality is identified by its language more than by its other essential features, because as long as the language lives, the nationality is not dead. Language brings about a desire to create a common literature, to preserve the customs and traditions and to transmit the national, the traditions and the cultural richness by means of education to the coming generations. National literature written in the national tongue is, according to Professor Herbert, "the record of the past and the expression of the national hopes. By its very existence it keeps alive the flame of national being and hands from generation to generation the torch which is made up of the memories of its suffering, glories and aspirations."

National literature and national language make a large contribution to the moulding of the national character and instill in the youth the same things and give him a similar outlook upon life. Achad Ha'am in his selected essays, says that "a nationality has no national language except that which was its own when it stood on the threshold of its history before its national self-consciousness was fully developed, that language which has accompanied it through every period of its career and is inextricably bound up with all its memories." It thus remains a fact that language has been and still is the prime factor in the formation of nationalities and in furthering their continued existence. A language cannot flourish unless it is the peculiar possession of a particular people who cherish and respect it.

IT was long believed that Hebrew had no place among the modern languages. Hebrew, it was held, once had been alive, but now it is dead language used only in ritual, and the development of modern Hebrew literature as well as its significance were a sort of surprise to those who had not kept in touch with the current trends of Jewish life and literature. Now it has become a well-established fact that Hebrew is the Jewish national language; it is the language in which all the monumental works of our literature have been written, it is the language in which all our customs and traditions are expressed, and it is spoken by a great number of Jews at the present time. The survival of the Jewish people throughout the ages entailed the survival of the Hebrew language and it remained indirectly the living language of the Jews in the Diaspora, for it retained its creative and style-producing powers.

Throughout the ages and in all lands the Jews have adopted the languages of the nations in whose countries they lived. They always, however, retained Hebrew as their fundamental language, which influenced the different vernaculars of the countries in the diaspora.

The creative and style-producing powers of the Hebrew language which were retained and preserved made it possible to create a modern literature written in a beautiful and expressive style. "The great wonder is," says Nahum Slouschz, "that this modern literature in Hebrew made itself without teachers, without patrons, without academics and literary salons, without encouragement in any shape or form." In spite of the opposition of the Rabbis and pious Jews of that time, in spite of the lack of financial support, the pioneers in modern Hebrew literature—the Literary Humanists—undertook this tremendous work and pursued it with admirable zeal. The untiring efforts and labours of the Hebrew writers found support among the leaders of the Jewish nationalistic movements which originated at the end of the eighteenth century. The Lovers of Zion first and the Zionists later realized that the only solution for the Jewish people would be the rebuilding of the Jewish National homeland and the revival of the Hebrew language in the Diaspora and Palestine. The Zionists claim that the Hebrew language and literature are "the foci of the rays vivifying all that breathes, that struggles, that creates, that hopes within the Jewish soul." To fail to understand the renaissance of the Hebrew language is to fail to understand the better part of Judaism and the Jew.

In spite of the various obstacles the Hebrew language has survived. The efforts of Luzzato, Mendes, the attempts of the leaders of the Haskalah and the work of the Jewish nationalists and Hebrew writers, the Hebrew literature acquired enough material to pursue its original mission of becoming a Jewish national language. "Let us be like all other nations," appeals Perez Smolenskin, "pursuing and attaining knowledge, unashamed of the rock whence we have been hewn, like the rest in holding dear our language and the glory of our people. It is not a disgrace for us to believe that our exile will once more come to an end

Y.I.V.O. Campaign

Dr. I. M. Steinberg has returned from the country after a successful tour on behalf of his mission in connection with the Y.I.V.O. campaign. He will remain in Johannesburg for three or four weeks to conclude the work of the campaign, after which he will proceed to other parts of the country.

Forthcoming High Festivals

It is announced by the United Hebrew Congregation of Johannesburg that enrolments are now taking place for membership of the Park and Yeoville Synagogue. Intending members can interview the secretaries at any time at the offices of the Congregation in Wolmarans Street.

The allotting of the seats to the general public for the forthcoming High Festival services will begin from August 26.

A.B.C. Orchestra

Mr. Harold Ketelby is celebrated as one of the leading violinists in South Africa. He gave a fine performance with the A.B.C. Symphony Orchestra on Tuesday evening at the Jewish Guild. It was his playing in the Saint-Saens' Concerto which brought out the excellent qualities of this classic composition. The orchestra proved a sympathetic second to Mr. Ketelby's playing and credit is due to Mr. J. Shulman, the conductor, for this fine harmonious accompaniment.

The orchestra was heard also in the famous Dvorak's Symphony No. 3 in F, of which they gave an excellent rendering.

Johannesburg Women's Zionist League

Observatory Branch.—The next meeting will be held in the home of Mrs. Mineer, 26 Observatory Circle Avenue, on Wednesday, the 12th inst., at 10.30 a.m. Mrs. L. Sorensen will speak on "Manasseh ben Israel."

... and we need not blush for clinging to the ancient language with which we wandered from people to people, in which our poets sang and our seers prophesied when we lived at ease in our land, and in which our fathers poured their hearts when their blood flowed like water in the sight of all . . . They who thrust us away from the Hebrew language meditate evil against our people and its glory."

The efforts of the Zionists were not in vain, they achieved their goal. The Hebrew language has the urge to return to its native soil, and it is returning there. In Palestine Hebrew experiences an enrichment and it becomes a language of expression. Hebrew—the linguistic aspect of Zionism—is the moving force of the Jewish National movement in the diaspora and in our Jewish National Homeland.

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