

## Yosef Klauzner

1874–1958. Born in Olkienik, near Vilna. Studied at the University of Heidelberg, where he received his doctorate. Succeeded Ahad Ha-Am as editor of *Ha-Shiloah* in 1903. Immigrated to Palestine in 1917. In 1925, appointed Professor of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University.

### ANCIENT HEBREW AND MODERN HEBREW<sup>84</sup>

I would like to take the liberty of beginning my lecture with a sad event in my life.

Last year my mother died. I sat *Shiva* and began reading the Book of Job, as is customary. But right after the “opening” of the book (chapters 1–2), I came upon a difficulty: instead of *reading* the book of Job, I had to *study* it; for most of its verses are written in an ancient language and require interpretation. And where you need an interpretation—you cannot savor what you read. The words of consolation lost their flavor and I didn’t enjoy the lofty argumentation. And I am ashamed to say: I took the French translation of Job by Louis Segond and began to read it chapter after chapter. Naturally, much of the sublimity of the wonderful Hebrew rhetoric and of the unique expressions of this divine book was lost in the foreign translation; but, on the other hand, as compensation I didn’t need any interpretations, the *language* was simple and intelligible, so that I could direct my thinking to the *idea*, admire the lofty arguments, and find solace in my grief.

And that is I who have been steeped in Hebrew literature all my life. For over sixty years, from my early childhood, I have not only written but spoken Hebrew.

Yes, I write and speak Hebrew. But the Hebrew of the Book of Job is not my Hebrew, namely, the modern Hebrew in which I write and speak.

This event broadened and deepened in me the idea I had several dozen years ago: There is ancient Hebrew and there is modern Hebrew, which are certainly very close to each other and linked organically to each other, but, after all, *are*

*not the same thing*. For not only do we not speak and write in the language of Isaiah and Job, but neither in the language of *Mishnah* and *Midrash*. [ . . . ]

Here is an example of a vital change. The Bible says: “Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale” (Isaiah 29:22); and the Talmud says: “He who *whitewashes* his friend’s face in public” (Avot 83:51); but in our day, we don’t think that the face of an ashamed person “gets pale” or “white,” but “*turns red*” from shame. Should we now use the language of the Bible or the Talmud against our own *senses*? [ . . . ]

Furthermore, we must open our eyes and see the truth: whoever is not a “scholar” and has not devoted at least ten of his best years to studying all the periods of our literature now no longer understands even Mendeleyev, Bialik, or Tshernikhovski. Soon they too will require an interpretation for their language as we need it for Job, the *Mishnah*, the *Midrash*, and the medieval research books. We already include considerable masses who can speak Hebrew but cannot read it. That is, they can read a newspaper, can read things written in a language close to spoken Hebrew, but cannot read texts whose language is Biblical or that alludes to typical Talmudic or Tibbonite<sup>85</sup> expressions. You may call this ignorance, you may get excited and angry at this sad phenomenon which the alumni of *heder*, *yeshiva*, or *shul* cannot come to terms with; but that won’t change the fact.

And the modern *school* is not to blame: modern *life* is to be blamed. In *heder*, they used to study seventeen hours a day for twelve months of the year (except for short breaks)—and only one discipline: the Torah and Rashi and Talmud. Nevertheless, only 20 percent of those who finished *heder* were capable of studying by themselves; 80 percent remained ignorant and hardly knew a verse of “Torah with Rashi.” In the new school, they study nine months of the year, and parents demand that they study history, geography, mathematics, English, and Arabic (or, in the Diaspora, two other foreign languages). How can you expect even the best students to know of our ancient literature what a *heder* graduate knew? But on the other hand, there is not one graduate of our new Hebrew school in Eretz-Israel who could not master the Hebrew language, write a Hebrew letter, or read a Hebrew book; but this Hebrew book must be written in modern Hebrew, not in a mixture of ancient, medieval, and modern Hebrew.

What do our writers today do?—Ostensibly they write modern Hebrew; but, in fact, it is a “language medley.” They mix Biblical Hebrew with Mishnaic Hebrew with Tibbonite Hebrew and think this is modern Hebrew *par excellence* because it is “synthetic Hebrew”—and nowadays “synthesis” is very popular: it serves instead of “compromise” which people are a bit ashamed of... And now the grammarians come and provide a grammar of the Hebrew language “in all its styles”—and think they have thus enriched and perfected the Hebrew language.

84. Excerpts from Lecture at the Fifth National Conference of the “Brigade of the Defenders of the Language,” Tel Aviv, Passover, 1929. We excerpted here the discussion of ideas and have deleted the specifically linguistic parts that require a knowledge of Hebrew.

85. The Tibbon family in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries translated many research and philosophical works from Arabic into Hebrew and created the style of Hebrew medieval philosophy.

Those "synthesizers" don't understand that their deeds are like yoking an elephant and a mastodon together.

For if there is development in the world, it is an evolution. An old layer is covered by a newer layer that is the same old layer with some additions and innovations. Of course the new is embodied in the old; but since the birth of the new, we no longer need the old unless we are interested in the evolution of the new; while in vital usage, the new pushed out the old and took its place. This is how evolution works, and this is the nature of things all over the world. The elephant derived from the mastodon, and scholars of antiquities are happy to prove that the mastodon preceded the elephant and that, if not for the mastodon, there would be no elephant in the world; but for various natural reasons—because the elephant was more fit for the new conditions—the elephant triumphed over the mastodon. And now whoever wants to revive the mastodon and use it instead of an elephant or whoever wants to yoke a mastodon and an elephant together would be a grotesque romantic and a hopeless Don Quixote.

Words and forms of a language change and evolve like animals. They too undergo a struggle of survival. A form that fits better for clear expression, a word that is easier and clearer, will always win over forms and words that are less fitting for the given expression or are less easy and lucid. Once upon a time, Martin Luther translated the word *alma* in Isaiah—which religious Christians see as an allusion to the Holy Virgin: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14)—with the German word *Dirne* (which is still remembered in the popular emotive word *Dirnchen*); but today, the word *Dirne* is a derogatory word for a whore and no German writer would use it to refer to the Holy Virgin or even to a plain, modest virgin. [...]

This is not the case in modern Hebrew literature, which is a pantheon of words, forms, and expressions from all periods, living peacefully next to one another. [...] For our language today is really not a language at all but a Biblical patch on top of a Mishnaic patch with a Tibbonite patch on top of it. And he who masters all those "languages" and can juggle them and combine them in various strange blends is a "language virtuoso." This is the above-mentioned "language synthesis" our writers boast they have used to enrich the revived Hebrew. But in fact it is nothing but "language syncretism": as our forefathers in the time of Ahab and Jezebel worshiped both Ba'al and Jehovah with no distinction, so we mix various language periods together—and that's our new Hebrew. This is a kind of linguistic ragout or vinaigrette, but not a real language. In a real language, there are earlier and later phenomena—and the earlier are always supplanted by the later: for this is the way of natural evolution. [...] And our modern language must be preferred over all the others, for it is new: it is the last of our four linguistic layers. And as in geological strata, plants and animals of earlier strata were supplanted by those of the most recent stratum, so in language strata—the *newest and latest* stratum precedes all the rest.

It may be argued that the Hebrew language was not spoken until these very

days. Therefore, it cannot have a natural evolution. It was only a literary language, and hence cannot rely on anything but literary examples. It was alive only in the Biblical and Mishnaic times. Later, when it lived only in writing and not in speech, it became very distorted, and we have no criteria to judge what is right and what is wrong except for the ancient examples from the time of the Temple. Otherwise—our language will become barbaric and grow wild.

There is a *lot* of truth in this argument but not *all* the truth. Even a language that lives in writing undergoes an evolution. If we agreed to that decision about the Hebrew language, we would have to admit to the Yiddishists that we came today to revive a corpse—which we absolutely must not do. The Hebrew language, which was alive in writing, also evolved in writing, even if not in an entirely normal way. And the vitality of the "dead language" was so great that it even influenced the "living languages" spoken among the Jews. [...] The literary Hebrew language did not cease weaving the thread of its life (or half-life) even for one generation in the whole fifteen hundred years of its existence. But we consider only the language of the Bible and to some extent the language of *Mishnah* and *Midrash*; and only just now have some begun to pay attention to the style of the Tibbonites. No one paid any attention to the modern language, to the conscious and subconscious changes made in it during the hundred and fifty years of intensive and uninterrupted development. Let us admit that, to this very day, not just for our grammarians but even for all the Hebrew teachers and for most writers writing Hebrew today, the Hebrew language is only the Biblical, vocalized Hebrew. For them, all the rest is simply a deviation, a "medley-language," considered distorted and barbaric.

We must put an end to this. How long will we waver: if we have a living and spoken language—it is the language of now, *with* its natural (not accidental) changes which our conservatives call "barbarisms"; and if the Hebrew language is only an imitation of the language of Job and Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi, then writing and speaking it is nothing but magic tricks, a talented attempt to imitate the ancients, but not natural writing or real speech. There is no "synthesis" in it at all, but this is really the "mixed language," and not the one with a few barbarisms: this ostensibly "synthetic" language is a mixture of Bible, *Mishnah*, and Tibbonite and has no trace of a unified language or language evolution. [...]

We must emphasize that we are not the only ones in this hesitation between an ancient and a modern language. There is another ancient nation that is proud of the splendor of its forefathers which, like the Jews, enriched the whole world with their culture; and their children have now declined, for they too were deprived of a government and a state for several hundred years and returned to life only a hundred and thirty years ago. I am referring to the *new Greeks*. [...]

The strength of the Hebrew language vis-à-vis the Ashkenazi and Sephardi jargons lies in her uninterrupted evolution for thousands of years. Our Hebrew script is twenty-five hundred years old (approximately from the time of Ezra). And if we cut off that thread of development, we weaken ourselves. *Mendele*

*Moykher Sforim* said in a speech at a celebration of his eightieth birthday in Odessa: "The force of forty thousand horsepower will not vanquish the force of four thousand years of the uninterrupted existence of the Hebrew language." We must not, therefore, make a breach in this ancient force. And yet modern Hebrew is the latest summary of this evolution uninterrupted for thousands of years: it absorbs and swallows, takes in and integrates the selection of all language periods, and grasps the latest and most developed in them. Hence, the demand to write and speak modern Hebrew does not mean ripping the historical thread but rather its continuation, without lagging or retreating. It means spinning the historical thread with no interruption; hence, this spinning involves opposing a return to a language period that is past and gone.

It may be argued that there are not sufficiently important changes between one language period and another language period in Hebrew and that it is therefore premature to distinguish ancient Hebrew and modern Hebrew. In my opinion, this is wrong. A Christian theologian who knows the Bible well does not understand the language of the *Mishnah* and the *Midrash*, which means there is a big difference between them. And a Jewish scholar in Western Europe, who is an expert in *Mishnah*, *Midrash*, and medieval literature, can barely read modern Hebrew literature and will always prefer reading a scientific book in another language to reading an equally important scientific book in modern Hebrew. Which means that even between the language of *Mishna* and *Midrash* and the language of the Tibbonites, on the one hand, and modern Hebrew, on the other hand, the difference is not that small.

Of course, the language of the *Mishna* must be at the base of modern Hebrew, for it is the later layer of the two language strata that emerged when Hebrew was still a spoken language in Eretz-Israel. The language of the Tibbonites, the language of the later rabbis, and the modern language up to Ben-Yehuda were formed at a time when Hebrew was no longer spoken on a regular basis. Nevertheless, we must not freeze at the *Mishna* language either. Many reasons have caused the changes in Hebrew in the last hundred and fifty years—and we must take account of those changes. [...]

Did you ever see a forest in early spring?—The first soft, young sprouts are burgeoning; yet heaps of dry, withered leaves are scattered on the forest ground and won't let the soft sprouts emerge into the air. The same is true of modern Hebrew. There are new, soft sprouts—and even if there are few of them, they are signs of a new development; but our pedantic and rigorous conservatism won't let them grow—and they dry up before they grow strong. [...] An important grammarian found mistakes in the poems of *Bialik* and in the stories of *Frishman*!—We must approve such literary forms and stop thinking of them as "mistakes": they are mistakes when you write ancient Hebrew, but are not mistakes at all when you write modern Hebrew. They must stop scaring us constantly that we are writing with mistakes because in phrase X in *Mishna* Y and in *Midrash* Z, the phrase is different. For if we are consistent in this matter, we may conclude

that modern Hebrew has no right to exist at all, as the scholar Nöldeke always argued: it takes Biblical words out of their context and their literal meaning in the Bible. To which we answer: the meanings of ancient words evolve and change willy-nilly. [...]

Of course we must be aware of barbarisms. Simple people in Eretz-Israel say: "*Ha-yeled ose li mavet*" [literally, "The child makes me death"] (from Ashkenazi-Jewish—i.e. Yiddish: *Er makht mir dem toyt*) or "*na'asa khoshekh li ba-eynaim*" [literally, "It was made dark in my eyes"] instead of "*khashkhu eynay*" [literally, "My eyes darkened"]—from Russian. And we must fight such jargonization and Russification of the Hebrew language, as we must fight Germanization, Anglicization, and Arabization. But not every barbarism is dangerous and deserves to be weeded out. A limited number of barbarisms is natural: no language was ever developed without a conscious or subconscious influence of another language. Sixty years ago, when I wrote "*She'ela bo'eret*" [literally, "A Burning Question"] for the first time, I was attacked from all sides: how dare you? A coarse Germanism: *Eine brennende Frage*—and now who does not use this "coarse Germanism" in Hebrew? Furthermore, those who do use the "burning question" no longer sense that this expression was ever felt to be non-Hebrew.

Of course, *Hodot l'*—"due to" and *Lamrot* ["despite"] are expressions influenced by German *dank* and *trotz*; but if our writers have used such expressions for a hundred years, we have no right to disqualify them today: otherwise we shall have to disqualify dozens of expressions from the *Mishna* that were influenced by the Aramaic language. [...] The "pure" German expression *Bekanntschaft machen* is nothing but a translation of the "pure" French expression *faire la connaissance*, which in turn, is a translation of the English expression *make acquaintance*; and who is to decide what is a barbarism and what is not!

It is certainly not my intention to abandon the language of the Bible, the *Mishna*, and the Tibbonites and their special Hebrew expressions. We will always teach our schoolchildren Bible, *Mishna*, and *Midrash*, and our language will always be influenced by the two earliest strata of our language, the Biblical and *Mishnaic*, for when they emerged, the Hebrew language was still spoken among the Jews. And we shall always write poems and religious treatises in a language close to the holy texts and the Talmud—the language of our poetry and the language of our oral teachings. Poetry and religion favor archaisms in all languages; not to mention in the Hebrew language of poetry and religion. But in simple prose, we too must approach the spoken language, as other languages do, even if to a lesser degree. For in other languages, too, there is a difference between the language of the marketplace and the language of literature; but a difference is not an abyss. And in our literature today, there is not a difference between those two, but a gaping abyss. This abyss must be bridged by bringing the literary language closer—in prose a great deal and in poetry more and more—to the spoken Hebrew language, which, after all, is the living language only coarsened and distorted by the marketplace.

Once, if you wanted to write simple Hebrew for children, you would write in the Biblical language: for the Hebrew language was known even sixty years ago not from speech but from study, and children studied Bible first of all. Now the situation is reversed: if you write for children in the Biblical language, you make it hard for them to understand. Our children in Eretz-Israel speak modern Hebrew from childhood and study the language of the Bible in school, so they don't know it well before the age of thirteen or fourteen. Hence it is a sin that many books intended especially for our children are written basically in the language of the Bible, even if they occasionally use Mishnaic Hebrew: this blended language is dead for them compared with the living language of our time; and when they read a book written in that language—even in the most “grammatical” and “exquisite” language—it is hard for them to understand and, in any case, they don't savor the living language, which is the only language of their lives and spirits. [. . .]

All this must end. Our language must be a real language, not an exhibit of more or less successful imitations of the ancients. We must speak and write as free men in their own language and not as slaves to Isaiah and Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi. That certainly does not mean canceling grammar and writing anything a fishwife in the marketplace may say or a casual journalist may write; but we must undo the *superfluous* chains—archaic forms, words, and expressions—that bind the legs of those who speak and write Hebrew; if not—our language will never live a full life! If not—it will never be a unified language but will forever remain “a mixed tongue”—mixed in with Bible, *Mishna*, Tibbonite. And this is not a language, but a linguistic hocus-pocus. [. . .]

Of course, there is a need to compose a special Biblical grammar, a *Mishna* grammar, and even a Tibbonite grammar to recognize the special character of every period of the Hebrew language and to study Bible, *Talmud*, and medieval literature; this is an important issue for academic science, for the scholars of language at the Hebrew University and outside of it. Of course, Ben-Yehuda's dictionary, which includes—or tries to include—all the words of the Hebrew language in all its periods and strata is a great and necessary achievement, and the Academy of the Hebrew Language, which will sooner or later be formed, must expand and perfect it, include in it all the words used in all times in Hebrew literature in the thousands of years of its existence—even the Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and Arabic words and words from other living languages incorporated in Hebrew literature throughout the ages. But for the needs of the living language and the living literature, for the needs of vital usage, we need a short and new grammar<sup>86</sup> and a short and new dictionary that will give us only what is alive and breathing today and what may be the most recent station, for the time being,

86. I published a *Short Grammar of Modern Hebrew*, with Mitspe, Tel Aviv, 1935, and it even went into a second edition; but the fanatics of ancient Hebrew prevented its acceptance in the schools of Eretz-Israel and overseas, in spite of the fact that it would have eased the study of the difficult Hebrew grammar that has long been obsolete. [Author's footnote]

in the development of modern Hebrew, a station from which our language will move forward unhindered.

I can end my remarks with the same words that closed the introduction to the second part of my book *Creators and Builders*:

We must and want to be the heirs of our forefathers, but not their graves!

(Jerusalem–Talpiot, 8 Sivan, 1929)