**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

**Shiur #26**

**1858: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda**

***The revival of the Hebrew language***

Eliezer Perelman, known as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, was born in Lithuania in 1858.[[1]](#footnote-1) He was raised and educated in the classic religious orthodox discipline; however, he received a secular education as well and was greatly influenced by the Haskalah movement. A great advocate of Zionist ideology, he published articles in several magazines arguing that the Jewish people must create a community in the land of Israel as it is their historical home. However, his greatest passion, and what differentiated him from other Zionist leaders, was the call for the revival of the Hebrew language.

Unlike other Zionist leaders, Ben-Yehuda believed that the return to the Land of Israel must include adopting Hebrew as its official language. Previously, Hebrew had been considered *lashon ha-kodesh* (the holy language) and was used solely in a religious context – for prayer and learning Torah.

Loyal to his beliefs, Ben-Yehuda made *aliya* in the year 1881 and he and his wife, Devora, agreed that they would speak to each other only in Hebrew from then on. When their son, Itamar, was born a year later, he decided that he would be the first child in centuries to be raised speaking Hebrew.

Ben-Yehuda founded a number of organizations and magazines during his lifetime that promoted Hebrew as a modern language. He also invented many new modern words, turning the ancient language into a practical one.

In the years prior to his *aliya*, Ben-Yehuda had stopped observing Torah and *mitzvot*. However, when the couple settled in Yerushalayim, they decided to adopt the religious customs of their neighbors and even dressed like them. Later, as opposition to him grew despite those efforts, he returned to a secular life. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was opposed by many within the religious community, as they suspected that his intentions included the creation of an alternative culture to the Jewish religion. This led to opposition to the Hebrew language; some religious leaders argued against speaking Hebrew in secular contexts!

Strangely, there are those who oppose him even today. The irony is that those who condemn him write their views in Hebrew, a proof of the success of Ben-Yehuda!

***Lashon Ha-kodesh***

Why is Hebrew named “*lashon ha-kodesh*” (the holy or sacred language)?[[2]](#footnote-2) Does this phrase indicate that Hebrew should be used only for religious matters, like prayer and Torah learning?

The Ramban argues with the Rambam about the meaning of this phrase.

Ramban says there is nothing objectively special or unique in the Hebrew language itself; rather, its *kedusha* derives from the fact that it is the language of God:

I hold that this is the same reason our Rabbis call the language of the Torah the Sacred Language, because the words of the Torah, and the prophecies, and all words of holiness(a reference to the third section of the Bible, which contains the Writings) were all expressed in that language. It is thus the language in which the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke with His prophets.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, the Rambam claimed that the Hebrew Language has certain sacred characteristics that no other language has:

Do not think that our language is called the Sacred Language just as a matter of our pride, or it be an error on our part, but it is perfectly justified; for this holy language has no special names for the organs of generation in male or female, nor for semen, nor for urination or excretion, excepting in indirect language.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the great poet and philosopher, also says Hebrew has special status, because it is the language God used to create the world. He further emphasizes the beauty of the Hebrew language and argues that its uniqueness is in the richness of its vocabulary:

The superiority of Hebrew is manifest from the logical point of view if we consider the people who employed it for discourses, particularly at the time when prophecy was rife among them; also for preaching, songs and psalmody. Is it conceivable that their rulers, such as for instance, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon, lacked the words to express what they wished, as is the case with us today, because the language is lost to us? Have you seen how the Torah, when describing the Tabernacle, Ephod, breastplate, and other objects, always finds the most suitable word for all these strange matters? How beautifully is this description composed! It is just the same with the names of people, species of birds and stones, the diction of David's Psalms, the lamentations of Job and his dispute with his friends, the addresses of Isaiah, etc.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Rav Yaakov Emden (Ya’avetz, Germany, 1697-1776) was asked whether it is permissible to study Hebrew in a bathroom. In his answer, he argues that there is no *kedusha* in the letters themselves and they are allowed to be taken into impure areas. He concludes that one should avoid learning Hebrew in a bathroom, however, because this might involve studying biblical texts that do have *kedusha* and should not be read or discussed in a place of impurity.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The history of speaking Hebrew**

 During the past two thousand years, Jews have scattered to the four corners of the earth, and as part of their integration, they began speaking the native languages. They also invented unique Jewish languages, such as Ladino and Yiddish, that were used for everyday communication. Hebrew became a religious language that was only used in prayer and Torah learning.

 Tension between Hebrew and other languages did not begin in the 19th century. As we will soon see, there were plenty of individuals during the centuries before Ben-Yehuda who tried to convince their communities to speak Hebrew.

 The Mishna, which was composed in Israel, was written in Hebrew; however, the next generation of Rabbis (*Amoraim*) composed the Talmud (especially Babylonian) in Aramaic! Rav Shimon Federbusch argues that during the eras of the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*, some were concerned about this change and attempted to prove the superiority of the Hebrew language over Aramaic and Greek.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 On one hand, there were those who praised the Aramaic language. For example, the Gemara (*Pesachim* 87b) discusses the question: Why, of all places in the world, were the Jews exiled to Babylon? One answer given is:

[Rabbi Ḥanina](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Crabbi-chanina) said: It is due to (the fact) that their language (Aramaic) is similar to the language of the Torah (which enables the Jews who live there to study Torah).[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, other quotes indicate the opposite. The Gemara also states (*Megilla* 3a) that the Land of Israel shook terribly when the Tanakh was translated into Aramaic. Further, the requirement (in *Berakhot* 8a) of *shnayim mikra ve-echad targum* – that the weekly *parasha* must be read twice in Hebrew and (only) once in its Aramaic translation – may illustrate that the shift from Hebrew to Aramaic was seen as negative and that the Rabbis wanted to emphasize Hebrew’s superiority over Aramaic.

 Rav Federbusch argues that Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi, the author of the Mishna, pushed an agenda for the Hebrew language to be spoken, apparently due to a sense that Aramaic and Hebrew were in conflict – as indicated, for example, by his ruling that prayers should not be recited in Aramaic (*Shabbat* 12a). The Gemara even teaches that when the Rabbis did not recognize the meaning of a Hebrew word, they turned to the maiden who worked in Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi’s house[[9]](#footnote-9) – which proves that this was the language spoken in his house!

 Many rabbis raised concerns with the Jewish community for “forgetting” the Hebrew language. Throughout the centuries, these rabbis delivered sermons encouraging their communities to speak and teach their children Hebrew.

 Rav Yonatan Eibeschitz (1690 – 1764) rebuked his generation for teaching their children French and not Hebrew. He emphasized that speaking Hebrew hastens the redemption.[[10]](#footnote-10) After all, the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 32:5) says our forefathers in Egypt were worthy of redemption due to their devotion and commitment to certain “Jewish customs,” such as speaking Hebrew.

 Rav Yechezkel Landau (Prague, 1713 –1793), one of the greatest *poskim* of the 18th century, composed a book of *mussar* (ethics) and *machshava* (philosophy) called *Ahavat Tzion*.[[11]](#footnote-11) He writes in Chapter 12 about the importance of teaching children Torah in Hebrew, quoting the Mishna in *Avot* (2:1) with Rambam’s commentary. The Mishna states:

Be careful with a light commandment as with a grave one, for you do know not the reward for the fulfillment of the commandments.

[Rambam](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=34304&st=&pgnum=49) gives two examples of “light” *mitzvot*: *simchat ha-regel* (being joyous on *yamim tovim*) and studying *lashon ha-kodesh*. The value of *lashon ha-kodesh* is based on a midrashic statement in the name of Rabbi Meir, who says that “anyone who dwells in Israel, recites *Shema* morning and evening, and speaks Hebrew” will merit the world to come.[[12]](#footnote-12) Some have derived from these statements that speaking Hebrew is a mitzva.[[13]](#footnote-13) Rav Landau delivered his message at a time when Torah was being learned in foreign languages and he was concerned that the Hebrew language was being forgotten.

**Hebrew in the 20th century**

 As Zionism spread in the Jewish world, religious communities also focused attention on speaking Hebrew.

 Rav Baruch ha-Levi Epstein (1860–1941), author of the *Torah Temima* commentary on *Chumash* and a member of the Mizrachi movement, composed an article explaining why speaking Hebrew is important. The composition is called *Safa La-ne’emanim* (The Language of the Loyal) and was first printed in Warsaw in 1893.[[14]](#footnote-14) He discusses speaking Hebrew in the first chapter, and the entire pamphlet is aimed at creating awareness of the value of speaking Hebrew.

 Those who opposed Zionism, such as the Satmar Rav, Rav Yoel Moshe Teitelbaum (1887 -1979), associated the move to encourage Hebrew with secularism and heresy.[[15]](#footnote-15) In an article called *Ma’amar Lashon Ha-kodesh*, he differentiates between *lashon ha-kodesh* and secular everyday use of Hebrew, arguing that the latter is prohibited.

 Rav Kook believed in speaking Hebrew and there is testimony that already during his youth, while studying in Volozhin, he delivered *divrei Torah* in Hebrew, which at the time was considered unusual.[[16]](#footnote-16) He explained in several places the importance of speaking Hebrew especially in the generation of the *Geula* (Redemption). However, he criticized the notion that speaking Hebrew is important as an ideal in itself. He writes in several places that Hebrew without connection to Torah and *mitzvot* misses the point; it is wrong and even potentially dangerous.[[17]](#footnote-17)

 We see that although Ben-Yehuda succeeded in reviving the “lost” Jewish language, there were other religious leaders throughout Jewish history who were also active in making their communities aware of the importance of speaking Hebrew.

1. See *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol. 4 pp.564-569, and the biography by Yosef Lang, *Daber Ivrit: Chayei Eliezer Ben Yehuda*, Yad Yitzchak ben Tzvi, Jerusalem, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BT *Sota* 32a. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From the Ramban’s commentary to *Shemot* 30:13; translation by Charles Chavel, available at Sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the Rambam’s view as it appears in the Ramban’s commentary. The original source is in *Guide of the Perplexed* III, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Kuzari* 2:68. Translation is by Hartwig Hirschfeld, 1905 (available at Sefaria.org), with occasional changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *She’eilat Ya’avetz* 1:10. My father quoted Rav Yehuda Gershuni (*Kol Tzofayich*, Jerusalem, 1980, p.306), who proved from this ruling that learning Hebrew is not a mitzva in itself; rather it is “only a prerequisite to Torah study.” See Binyamin Tabory, *The Weekly Mitzva*, Maggid, Jerusalem, 2015, p.52. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *B’netivot Ha-Talmud*, Mossad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem, 2007, pp.177-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. William Davidson edition, available at Sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Rosh Ha-shana* 26a. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ya'arot Devash*, Lublin, 1897, vol.2, p. 235; available online at <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=32683&st=&pgnum=234>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Available online at <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41350&st=&pgnum=36>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Sifri* on *Devarim* 32:43. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Rav Ari Shvat, *Shma’atin* 177, Kislev 2010, pp. 27-50, who discusses at great length whether there is a mitzva to speak Hebrew. Available online at <https://daat.ac.il/daat/v-articles/shvat-lashon.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Available online at <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/43722>. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Printed in his book *Vayoel Moshe.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Chaim Lifshitz, *Shivchei Ha-Re’aya*, Machon Harry Fischell, Jerusalem, 1979, p.45. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Rav Neria Gutel, *Yachaso Shel Ha-Rav Kook L’techiyat Ha-Lashon Ha-Ivrit*, *Shma’atin* 177, pp.11-26. Available online at <https://orot.ac.il/sites/default/files/shmaatin/177-1.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)