

The Embrace of the Rosebush: Anti-Hebraism in Modern Jewish Literature

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Among the consequences of modernization is an unprecedented tendency among Jewish writers, especially those writing in English, to denigrate or caricature Hebrew and generally give a limited and distorted picture of the Hebrew language and of Jewish education and culture. Until the nineteenth century Jews and Christians found common ground in their supremely high valuation of Hebrew as the Holy Tongue. With the rise of the secular Enlightenment, the devaluation of Scripture, and Jewish emancipation and civil rights, the traditional Jewish view of Hebrew was contested for the first time, in Germany then elsewhere, particularly in English-speaking countries. Jewish anti-Hebraism has more than purely historical interest and relevance in multicultural societies that aim to preserve minority languages and cultures. It warns that assimilation, however rational, just, and beneficial, can exact a high cost to the minority culture. Consequently, minorities are often right to be protective of their cultures, and cautious and critical of the education provided by the dominant culture.

Sources of anti-Hebraism may be found in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the rise of nationalism, especially in Germany. Enlightenment and the decline of religion led to a critical reevaluation of the Hebrew Bible as of all religious texts. Hebrew for the first time became a target of controversy and confusion over Jewish national-religious identity. From the time of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the leading figure in the German-Jewish Enlightenment (*Aufklärung* or, in Hebrew, *Haskalah*), Hebrew bridged traditional Judaism with non-Jewish culture. As the language of Holy Scripture, Hebrew was blessed by the German academic world with a status not inferior to Latin and Greek and, therefore, became suitable as a vehicle for Jewish assimilation. But this was a secular status. Hebrew was stripped by Enlightenment thinkers of its aura of reverence and cannibalized into a didactic tool by which Jews ignorant of European languages and learning could gain a secular education. This was a revolutionary transformation: Hebrew, originally in Germany, but increasingly elsewhere, could be used somewhat like baptism in Heinrich Heine's (1797–1856) quip, as an "entrance ticket" to European civilization. In the nineteenth century, many educational works were written in or translated into Hebrew.

At the same time, secular enlightenment made Hebrew vulnerable to attacks as a best-discarded symbol of religious insularity and educational backwardness, a bar to emancipation, to desired assimilation, acceptance, and worldly success. In the first Hebrew journal, *Ha-Me'assef* (The Gatherer), founded by disciples of Mendelssohn in 1784, there were frequent articles calling for the elimination of Hebrew as the language of prayer.¹ German must now be the language of Jews in German-speaking lands. The trouble with the functional view of Hebrew was that once the function—assimilation into German culture—was achieved, Hebrew was like the stage of a rocket that had served its purpose and could be dropped. Assimilation generally led to the abandonment of Hebrew.

Political emancipation and cultural assimilation hastened the retreat from Hebrew. From the start, emancipation was a deeply ambivalent and flawed process, summed up in a debate in the French National Assembly on 23 December 1789 by the French advocate of emancipation, Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre (1757–1792): “The Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals.”² This idea that French citizenship was conditional upon renunciation of Jewish national interests had sinister implications for the future of the European Jews and their culture, including the use of Hebrew. When in 1807 Napoleon convened the Jewish Sanhedrin, he insisted that its members make the so-called National Affirmation, declaring exclusive allegiance to France. The preservation of Hebrew as the repository of Jewish national memories and hopes could thus be seen as unpatriotic.

Among German Jews, too, Hebrew became a problematic issue. In a pamphlet of 1812 (the year the Prussian Jews were emancipated), the founder of German Reform, David Friedländer (1750–1834), appealed to Prussian Jewry “to undertake complete religious, social, as well as educational reforms for the sake of becoming fully integrated in the Prussian state”³—including the elimination of Hebrew from Jewish education and prayer. The preface to the 1817 *siddur* of the Berlin Reform congregation states that however holy Hebrew had been to the Jews in the past, German was more important now: “seven times more holy unto us is the language which belongs to the present and to the soil whence we have sprung forth.”⁴ The reformers excluded Hebrew prayers for Zion and Jerusalem

¹ Isaac E. Barzilay, “National and Anti-National Trends in the Berlin Haskalah,” *Jewish Social Studies* 21 (1959): 168.

² In Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 104.

³ Barzilay 168. Also see David Aberbach, “Nationalism, Reform Judaism and the Hebrew Prayer Book,” *Nations and Nationalism* 12.1 (2006): 139–59.

⁴ Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe: The Liturgy of European Liberal and Reform Jews* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968) 135. The critical attitudes toward Judaism of the German Reform may underlie the German Jewish novelist Ludwig Lewisohn’s efforts at extreme assimilation in his early years—against which he reacted later in life. See note 13 below.

partly because they genuinely believed them to be anachronistic but also in reaction against the charge that Jews could not be loyal citizens.

A recoil from Hebrew is evident also in Jewish communities that failed to establish schools in which their children learned Hebrew, or that provided second-rate education, putting the children off; in the massive insecurity leading to grotesque patriotism, above all among German Jews, for countries harboring genocidal impulses towards the Jews, and exaggerated attachment to their cultures in preference to Jewish culture; and in the ignorance of Hebrew most strikingly among the Jewish or baptized Jewish intelligentsia.

The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German-speaking Jews were in the forefront of a socio-psychological revolution among the Jews: for the first time they revered non-Jewish culture as superior to their own. Karl Marx's school report has favorable comments on his knowledge of Greek and Latin but the entry on Hebrew is blank. Sigmund Freud, who as a young man kept a diary in Greek, professed ignorance of Hebrew in his Hebrew preface to *Totem and Taboo* (1913), though he had in fact studied Hebrew as a child. Freud gave his children no Jewish education whatsoever. His son Martin recalled his maternal grandmother, Emmeline, as the end of the line, traditionwise: "She stayed with us occasionally and on Saturdays we used to hear her singing Jewish prayers in a small but firm and melodious voice. All of this, strangely enough in a Jewish family, seemed alien to us children who had been brought up without any instruction in Jewish ritual."⁵

Similarly ignorant of Hebrew was Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), founder of political Zionism. Herzl envisaged German as the language of high culture among Zionists. He only slightly exaggerated when he asked his colleagues in the Zionist movement, "Who among us can ask for a railway ticket in Hebrew?" He needed special coaching to undergo the ordeal of reciting the short blessings when called to the Torah at the time of the First Zionist Congress, held in Basel in 1897: "When he was called up to the Torah, he found that the few Hebrew words of the benediction were causing him more anxiety than all the speeches he had delivered, more than the entire direction of the congress."⁶

Kafka was even more frightened of Hebrew than Herzl. In his 1919 "Letter to His Father," Kafka tells that for years he was terrified that he would be called to recite the blessing in synagogue as his father had not troubled to have him

⁵ Martin Freud, *Glory Reflected* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1957) 14. For a summary of Freud's Jewish background, with bibliography, see David Aberbach, *Major Turning Points in Jewish Intellectual History* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 122–28.

⁶ Amos Elon, *Herzl* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975) 237.

taught Hebrew.⁷ Shortly before his death in 1924, Kafka began studying Hebrew. His last writings include lists of Hebrew vocabulary.

Even during the interwar period—a time of Hebrew creativity unprecedented since the Bible, including the works of Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888?–1970), later to win the Nobel Prize for Literature—there was much denigration of Hebrew, particularly among German-Jewish intellectuals. In a well-known joke of the 1930s, a German Jewish refugee walking in Tel Aviv is asked the time in Hebrew. Deeply offended, he replies, *Was meinst du, ich bin ein Kind?* (What do you think, I am a child?)—in other words, Hebrew was for children, not grown-ups. Hannah Arendt at this time expressed typically irrational contempt for Hebrew in first confessing her ignorance of the language, then echoing Heine’s quip that Judaism was not a religion but a misfortune, describing Hebrew as “no language, but a national misfortune.”⁸

Arendt’s contemporary, the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil (1909–1943), was even more extreme in her rejection of Hebrew and the entire Jewish tradition. Though educationally brilliant and saintly in her compassion for suffering humanity, Weil had the ignorance of Judaism and the self-hate characteristic of many highly assimilated French Jews prior to and even during the Holocaust. The only admission in her writings of her Jewish origins was in a letter that she wrote in Marseilles in 1940 to the Vichy minister of education complaining about the French anti-Jewish laws. Rather than express outrage at France’s betrayal of its Jews or compassion for their suffering, Weil protests that she has no connection with Jews and Judaism. She has never set foot in a synagogue. She feels no connection with the Land of Israel. She is a French patriot. Her education is French. Her “patrimony” is the French Catholic tradition: “la tradition hébraïque m’est étrangère” (the Hebrew tradition is foreign to me).⁹

ANTI-HEBRAISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE. Ambivalence and opposition to Hebrew in the German Reform movement was transplanted to America in the second half of the nineteenth century and had a decisive influence there. The negative view of Hebrew in English literature since about 1900 is confined mainly to Jewish writers. English writers from other ethnic groups do not treat their native languages similarly: Joseph Conrad, whose native language was Polish, does not denigrate Polish; Vladimir Nabokov does not attack Russian; Kazuo Ishiguru does not run Japanese down. In English literature, for the first

⁷ Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Stories*, trans. E. and W. Muir (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978) 56–57.

⁸ In Steven E. Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 6.

⁹ Simone Petrement, *La vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973) 528. Also see Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001) 155.

time, Hebrew ceased to be an object of veneration. Hebrew teachers were denigrated, caricatured, or dismissed, and Hebrew was seen as a relic of the past; it was associated with the damp basement, the sadistic ignorant teacher, the world of the fathers to be escaped into a brave new world of English. Some of this literature might be condemned as anti-Semitic if the authors were not Jewish. Only a few—among them A. M. Klein, Cynthia Ozick, and Herman Wouk—acknowledged the full importance of Hebrew in Jewish life. Wouk observes in *This Is My God* (1959; rev. 1973) that among Jews ignorance of Hebrew was traditionally regarded as little short of national suicide: “Loss of Hebrew has always been a long step toward loss of law, custom, and knowledge, and toward oblivion by absorption.”¹⁰ Even writers such as Charles Reznikoff, with considerable warmth toward Jewish tradition, often seem alienated by Hebrew. These lines are from *Five Groups of Verse* (1927): “How difficult for me is Hebrew: / even the Hebrew for *mother*, for *bread*, for *sun* / is foreign. How far have I been exiled, Zion.”¹¹

The portrait of the *cheder* (lit. “room,” the name given to the traditional Jewish school) is especially grim in immigrant literature. In *Jews Without Money* (1930), Michael Gold recalled his *cheder* teacher in the Lower East Side around 1900: “This man was a walking, belching symbol of the decay of orthodox Judaism. What could such as he teach any one? He was ignorant as a rat. He was a foul smelling, emaciated beggar who had never read anything, or seen anything, who knew absolutely nothing but this sterile memory course in dead Hebrew which he whipped into the heads and backsides of little boys.... He was cruel as a jailer. He had a sadist’s delight in pinching boys with his long pincer fingers; he was always whipping special offenders with his cat-o’-nine tails; yet he maintained no real discipline in his hell-hole of Jewish piety.”¹² In a later autobiographical fragment, published in 1959, Gold admitted: “I’d been taught just enough Hebrew to enable me to read the prayers, not enough Hebrew to understand a single word ... the old Jewish God was not dead in me—only transformed. Now I was searching for Him in English.”¹³

¹⁰ Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (London: Souvenir Press 1992) 102. The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin recalled his first lessons in Hebrew in Tsarist Russia before the Revolution and how his rabbi once paused to say: “Dear children, when you get older, you will realize how in every one of these letters there is Jewish blood and Jewish tears.” Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Penguin Books, Black Sparrow Press, 1998) 21.

¹¹ Charles Reznikoff, *Poems 1918–1936*, ed. S. Cooney (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1976) 72.

¹² Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1996) 65. Sidney Hook recalled Hebrew classes in early twentieth-century America: “Because of the primitive character of our religious instruction in that time and place, Judaism seemed mainly a mass of superstition taught by tyrannical old men who brooked no contradiction or honest doubt.” *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 33.

¹³ Mike Gold, *A Literary Anthology*, ed. M. Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972) 317. In his autobiography, *Up Stream* (New York: The Modern Library, 1926 [orig. 1921]), Ludwig Lewisohn describes himself at age fifteen as “an American, a Southerner and a Christian” (he was at that time a practising Methodist), hostile to everything Jewish and German as these “might come between me and the one thing in the world I cared for supremely—the poetry of the English tongue” (86).

In Henry Roth's classic novel of American-Jewish immigrant life, *Call It Sleep* (1934), David Schearl from his first day in *cheder* learns to associate Hebrew with ignorance and cruelty: "The boy fumbled on. As far as David could tell, he seemed to be making the same error over and over again, for the rabbi kept repeating the same sound. At last, the rabbi's patience gave out. He dropped the pointer; the boy ducked, but not soon enough. The speeding plane of the rabbi's palm rang against his ear like a clapper on a gong. 'You plaster dunce!' he roared, 'when will you learn a byse is a byse and not a vyse. Head of filth, where are your eyes?' He shook a menacing hand at the cringing boy and picked up the pointer."¹⁴

Similar associations of caricature and menace, though not unmixed with affection, are found in Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog* (1964). The university professor Moses Herzog remembers his time in a Montreal *cheder* in the 1920s, when he was taught the story of the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife (an appropriate flashback in view of Herzog's troubled relationships with women): "The pages of the Pentateuch smelled of mildew, the boys' sweaters were damp. The rabbi, short-bearded, his soft big nose violently pitted with black, scolding them. 'You, Rozavitch, you slacker. What does it say here about Potiphar's wife, *V'tispeseyu b'vigdo...*' 'And she took hold of...' 'Of what? *Beged.*' '*Beged.* A coat.' 'A garment, you little thief. *Mamzer!* I'm sorry for your father. Some heir he's got! Some *Kaddish!* Ham and pork you'll be eating, before his body is in the grave. And you, Herzog, with those behemoth eyes—*V'yaizov bigdo b'yodo.*' 'And he left it in her hands.' 'Left what?' '*Bigdo,* the garment.' 'You watch your step, Herzog, Moses. Your mother thinks you'll be a great *lamden*—a rabbi. But I know you, how lazy you are. Mothers' hearts are broken by *mamzeirim* like you! Eh! Do I know you, Herzog? Through and through.'"¹⁵

From Bellow to Philip Roth and Bruce Jay Friedman, the image of Hebrew is less that of a storehouse of wisdom and tradition than a detestable racetrack. Roth's story "The Conversion of the Jews" (1957) tells of a bright child in Hebrew class with an authoritarian teacher. Forced to read at speed from a Hebrew text, he cannot understand what he is reading and runs from the classroom in a rage. He climbs onto the roof and threatens to jump unless the crowd below declares its belief in Jesus Christ. A later incarnation of this child might be Roth's fictional authorial mirror, Nathan Zuckerman, who in *The Human Stain* (2000) seems to identify more with the ancient Greeks' alleged "reconciliation" with human

¹⁴ Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960) 215.

¹⁵ Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 131. A generation later, the Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler in his autobiographical *The Street* (1969) had equally unpleasant memories of Hebrew in Montreal: "The old underpaid men who taught us Hebrew tended to be surly, impatient. Ear-twisters and knuckle-rappers. They didn't like children" (London: Penguin Books, 1985) 4. For many, the main reason for Hebrew lessons was not the intrinsic value of the language but the need to prepare for the bar mitzvah. Some writers, such as Norman Mailer or Harold Pinter, volunteer little more than that their Hebrew education stopped mercifully at age thirteen.

imperfection than with the “monomaniacal” guilt-inducing God of the Bible. Describing a Jewish funeral, Zuckerman declares his ignorance of the meaning of the “Hebrew” words in the Kaddish. In fact, the Kaddish is in Aramaic.

In Bruce Jay Friedman’s novel *Stern* (1962), the protagonist recalls going to synagogue as a child and thinking it marvellous that the old men knew, as he puts it, when to bow and when to groan: “He went to Hebrew School, but there seemed to be no time at all devoted to the theatrical bows and groans, and even with three years of Hebrew School under his belt Stern still felt a loner among the chanting sufferers at synagogues. After a while he began to think you could never get to be one of the groaners through mere attendance at Hebrew School. You probably had to pick it all up in Europe. At the school, Stern learned to read Hebrew at a mile-a-minute clip. He was the fastest reader in the class, and when called upon he would race across the jagged words as though he were a long-distance track star. The meaning of the words was dealt with in advanced classes, and since Stern never got to them, he remained only a swift reader who might have been performing in Swahili or Urdu.”¹⁶

Private tuition in Hebrew by rabbis, though rousing less antipathy than the *cheder*, is often regarded as quaint, frustrating, or incomprehensible. Mary Antin’s memoir *The Promised Land* (1912) is unusual as it describes a girl being taught Hebrew. The “lesson” includes this quasi-vaudeville exchange, which takes place around 1890 in the Lithuanian shtetl of Polotzk, and which anticipates Antin’s later atheism: “Rebbe, translating: ‘In the beginning God created the earth.’ Pupil, repeating: ‘In the beginning—Rebbe, when was the beginning?’ Rebbe, losing the place in amzement: ‘*S gehert a kashe?* (Ever hear such a question?) The beginning was—the beginning—the beginning was in the beginning, of course! *Nu! nu!* Go on.’ Pupil, resuming: ‘in the beginning God made the earth—Rebbe, what did He make it out of?’ Rebbe, dropping his pointer in astonishment: ‘What did—? What sort of girl is this, that asks questions? Go on, go on!’ The lesson continues to the end. The book is closed, the pointer put away. The rebbe exchanges his skullcap for his street cap, is about to go. Pupil, timidly, but determinedly, detaining him: ‘Reb’ Leb, *who made God?*’”¹⁷

In his memoir, *Timebends* (1987), Arthur Miller also describes private Hebrew lessons when he was a child, around 1920. Hebrew seemed an alien culture learned by heart without thinking. The one Hebrew word he remembers—a *tsadik*, a righteous man—he translates incorrectly: “This bearded ancient taught purely by rote, pronouncing the Hebrew words and leading us to repeat after him. In the book, the English translations of the passages from Genesis faced the Hebrew, but there were no English translations of the English: what did *firmament* mean? The worst of it was that when I spoke a passage

¹⁶ Bruce Jay Friedman, *Stern* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962) 54–55.

¹⁷ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (London: William Heinemann, 1912) 114–15.

correctly, the old man would kiss me, which was like being embraced by a rosebush. Once he leaned over and, laughing, gave my cheek a painful pinch and called me *tsadik*, wise man, a compliment I understood neither then nor later.”¹⁸

The critique of Hebrew in English fiction is, at times, not devoid of affection, even awe. In *Call It Sleep*, there is a scene unparalleled in all the literature on *cheder* education. The boy actually breaks *into* the *cheder* in order to read the Hebrew story of Isaiah’s theophany: “Holy, Holy Holy is the Lord of Hosts.” But such reverence for Hebrew as sacred is rare. The South African novelist Dan Jacobson describes how as a child he was dragged by his father to synagogue and Hebrew classes.¹⁹ Failure to learn Hebrew is a theme also in Jacobson’s semi-biographical story, “Through the Wilderness”: “All the attempts that had been made in my childhood to teach me Hebrew had ended in failure. I had been determined that they should. For all the usual, obvious reasons. I had associated the Hebrew language with being alien, set apart; exposed; implicated in what I was convinced at an early age was a continuing, unendurable history of suffering and impotence; involved with a religion in whose rituals I could find no grace, no power, no meaning....”²⁰

In Woody Allen’s writings, too, Hebrew is an impediment and a source of maladjustment. His film *Zelig* (1983), set between the world wars, explores issues of identity, assimilation, and the wish to belong. Leonard Zelig has an extraordinary gift (or curse) of assimilation—with Irish he becomes Irish, with Chinese he becomes Chinese, with blacks he actually turns black, and so on. Under a semi-comic hypnosis, he finds that his alienation from society and his longing to be accepted are linked to anxieties induced by Hebrew: “I’m twelve years old ... I run into a synagogue ... I ask the rabbi the meaning of life.... He tells me the meaning of life ... but he tells it to me in Hebrew ... I don’t understand Hebrew.... Then he wants to charge me six hundred dollars for Hebrew lessons.”²¹

Clive Sinclair in “Scriptophobia” (later to become the opening of his novel *Blood Libels*) alludes further to the low standing of Hebrew. The narrator Jake Silkstone, a writer, recalls his Hebrew education in London as a disaster prefiguring his later life. He has studied “with all the enthusiasm of a Philistine”: “‘Why do I need to learn Hebrew?’ I asked my melamed. ‘Because you are a Jew,’ she replied. ‘But all the Jews I know talk English,’ I protested. ‘God doesn’t,’ she replied, ‘He only listens to Hebrew.’ ‘But I never speak to God,’ I said, ‘I don’t believe in Him.’ Instead of trying to convert me with ontological,

¹⁸ Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (London: Methuen, 1987) 25.

¹⁹ Dan Jacobson, *Time and Time Again* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1985) 2.

²⁰ Dan Jacobson, *Through the Wilderness: Selected Stories* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977) 160.

²¹ Woody Allen, *Three Films of Woody Allen* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990) 77.

cosmological, or teleological arguments, the defender of our benevolent deity slapped me around the face. 'I'll teach you to say such things,' she screamed. True to her word, though ignoring that on the door, she dragged me into the Ladies lavatory, where she violently washed out my mouth with soap and water."²²

HEBREW AND JEWISH LITERARY CRITICS. Jewish critics, too, seem at times unable to resist the admission of ignorance of Hebrew. Lionel Trilling, in an essay on Wordsworth and the Mishnaic tractate Ethics of the Fathers, makes an unexpected detour to his childhood, when he first became acquainted with the rabbinic work in English translation, clandestinely, presumably in synagogue, for he was meant to be saying his prayers "in the Hebrew language, which I never mastered."²³ In *A Walker in the City*, Alfred Kazin makes a similar admission in his description of his pre-bar mitzvah Hebrew teacher, "who would sit across the table eating peas, and with an incredulous scowl on his face listen to me go over and over the necessary prayers and invocations, slapping me sharply on the hands whenever I stammered on a syllable. I had to learn many passages by heart, but never understood most of them, nor was I particularly expected to understand them..."²⁴ Another critic, John Gross, recalls in his autobiography how at the time of the establishment of Israel in 1948 he was discouraged from learning Hebrew: "I was even slightly put out by the fact that the textbook [by Harold Levy] from which I tried, not very successfully, to learn modern Hebrew was called Hebrew for All in English, but Ivri, L'mud Ivrit—'Hebrew, Learn Hebrew!', which sounded so very much more peremptory—in Hebrew itself."²⁵ Similarly, in his book *Enthusiasms* (1983), Bernard Levin pointedly omits Hebrew: "I went to Sunday school, though that was almost entirely a matter of learning Hebrew (at which I proved a singularly poor scholar)."²⁶

²² Clive Sinclair, *For Good or Evil* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books 1991) 261. The Anglo-Jewish novelist Howard Jacobson, in an autobiographical memoir, describes a visit to Israel in which he is continually reminded that he is ignorant of Hebrew. When asked if he speaks Hebrew, "I shake my head." At the Western Wall, he would like to read some of the notes squeezed into the cracks, "but the script appears always to be Hebrew." Ironically, the Palestinian Arabs whom he encounters know Hebrew: "Do you not speak Hebrew? No Hebrew?" *Roots Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews* (New York and London: Viking Penguin, 1993) 289, 307, 341. In a book on the search for Jewish "roots," Jacobson never considers that these may be found in large part in the Hebrew language and literature.

²³ In M. H. Abrams, ed., *Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972) 49. In *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), Irving Howe emphasizes the importance of Yiddish in his Bronx upbringing. Hebrew seems to have had no importance in his early life, when he first experienced "a kinship of sorts with American writers like Hawthorne and Melville, who had also known the shock of suddenly reduced circumstances" (7).

²⁴ Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (New York: Knopf, 1951) 45–46.

²⁵ John Gross, *A Double Thread: A Childhood in Mile End—and beyond* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001) 164.

²⁶ Bernard Levin, *Enthusiasms: An Irresistible Celebration of the Joys of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983) 58.

Few Jewish literary critics writing in English seem to value fully the centrality of Hebrew in Jewish life, as summed up by the Hebrew poet and critic Simon Halkin: “only the Hebrew language has spanned the vastness of Jewish history in time and space. Hebrew, therefore, has proved the single repository of Jewish existence as a whole; and its literature—including the productivity of the last two hundred years—holds the only continuous record of Jewish vitality.”²⁷

Instead, to Jewish critics writing in English, Hebrew is often oppressively foreign. The British journalist and writer John Diamond confesses his ignorance of Hebrew in a story of his malfunctioning computer.²⁸ He takes it to a repair shop run by a Hasidic Jew in the East End of London. The Hasid offers to do the job gratis if Diamond recites the *Shema* (the Jewish credo beginning “Hear O Israel, the Lord is God the Lord is One” [Deuteronomy 6:4–9]) in Hebrew. Diamond replies that he cannot read Hebrew and last said the *Shema* at age eleven. The Hasid, undaunted, persuades Diamond to put on a *kippa* (skullcap) and *tefillin* (phylacteries) and himself recites the Hebrew words for Diamond to repeat as best as he can while the computer is being repaired. Diamond leaves in a guilty swirl of stereotypes, having paid for the free job by being made to feel that perhaps something in him can never be repaired.

HEBREW AND JEWISH EDUCATION IN HEBREW LITERATURE. The jaundiced view of Hebrew among many German and English writers contrasts with the traditional reverence for Hebrew among Hebrew and Yiddish writers, who also recognized Hebrew as a secular language capable of being restored and of restoring its speakers in the Land of Israel. Russian novelist Peretz Smolenskin (1842?–1885) describes Hebrew as integral in Jewish survival: “We are secure if we hold fast to the ancient language which has accompanied us from country to country, to the tongue in which our poets and prophets spoke, in which our forefathers cried aloud with their dying breath.... Our language is our national fortress; if it disappears into oblivion the memory of our people will vanish from the face of the earth.”²⁹

S. Ansky, pseudonym of Shloyme Zanvil Rapoport (1863–1920), gives a moving account of the value of Hebrew among premodern Jews in his Yiddish and Hebrew play *The Dybbuk* (1917–1920): “There are seventy languages in the world, and the holiest among them is Hebrew. And the holiest work in the Hebrew language is the Torah, and its holiest part is the Ten Commandments, and the holiest word in the Ten Commandments is the name of God.”³⁰

²⁷ Simon Halkin, *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Schocken Books, 1950) 211–12.

²⁸ John Diamond, *Snake Oil and Other Preoccupations* (New York: Vintage, 2001) 162–64. This piece, entitled “My Hassidic Problem,” was published in the *London Times*, 25 January 1997.

²⁹ Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz 325.

³⁰ S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk and Other Writings*, trans. G. Werman et al., ed. D. Roskies (New York: Schocken Books, 1992) 170.

Traditional Jewish education is often attacked in modern Hebrew literature. Yet, even when Hebrew study in childhood involved corporal punishment—as education generally did—Hebrew was not rejected but seen as part of an uncontested way of life, in some ways rich, beautiful, and immensely satisfying. M. Z. Feierberg's Hebrew story "In the Evening" (1897) communicates powerfully the sense of being in exile in a hostile world, prefigured in the biblical texts: "The rabbi dealt out blows, shouted, and taught us the Bible on one side of the table, while his assistants did the same on the other. The third reading from the Book of Genesis flowed forth in a frightful lament, each word ripping with misery and the dread fear of God: 'Get thee from thy land, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, to the land that I will show thee' [12:1]."31

The child's lack of critical perspective is an asset here, and the atrocious teaching "method" does not stifle his imaginative response to the power of the narrative. At times, however, Hebrew opened a world of great charm and insight. C. N. Bialik (1873–1934), for example, in his mystical autobiography *Aftergrowth* (1903–1923), recalled a two-week convalescence after a beating by a teacher in the Ukrainian village where he was born; but then in another local school, he studied the Twenty-third Psalm:

The translation of the words became superfluous, almost detrimental. The words flowed and flowed from the heart with the meaning bound up inside them. The gate of understanding was opened of its own accord, "like a tree planted"—quite literally, that was the tree under whose shade we were sitting. "By streams of water"—plainly, this was the water channel below. "The valley of the shadow of death"—that was the ruin, where evil spirits lurked, and the teacher had forbidden us to enter it. "You prepare a table before me"—this was surely the table that we were sitting at now, engaged in "God's Torah." "In the presence of my enemies"—who are these enemies if not the "hooligans," the young shepherds, a curse upon them, who sometimes appear with their staffs and packs on top of the hill, showing us from the distance "pig's ears" and mocking us with their "geer, geer, geer"? ... Surely they are those very same "wicked" in the psalm, who are destined, God willing, to be "like chaff which the wind drives away," one puff—and they are gone....32

The stories and novels of the Nobel laureate S. J. Agnon are written in Hebrew and represent a summing up of the value of Hebrew through the ages and its capacity to function both as a Holy Tongue and also as a language of a modern secular state. To the child in Agnon's fiction, however, Hebrew is holy

31 M. Z. Feierberg, *Whither? and Other Stories*, trans. H. Halkin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973) 86.

32 C. N. Bialik, *Random Harvest: The Novellas of Bialik*, trans. D. Patterson and E. Spicehandler (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999) 49–50.

and capable of redeeming the Jews from exile. The child in the story "The Kerchief" (1932) associates a local beggar with the Messiah, as in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98a), and imagines that he is waiting to save the Jews. The image of the beggar-Messiah is parallel to the image of Hebrew itself prior to the twentieth century—impoverished but capable of uniting and transforming a downtrodden people: "Yesterday he sat among the beggars and they did not recognize him, but sometimes even abused him and treated him with disrespect; and now suddenly the Holy One, blessed be He, has remembered the oath He swore to redeem Israel, and given him permission to reveal himself to the world."³³

HEBREW IN WESTERN CIVILIZATION. Reverence for Hebrew among modern Hebrew writers has been, in fact, the norm in Western civilization until the nineteenth century—despite the prevalence of anti-Jewish caricatures—though knowledge of Hebrew was widespread only among Jews. Translations of the Bible into the vernacular throughout Europe in the century after the invention of printing by Gutenberg in the 1450s—in German, English, French, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Hungarian, and Polish, among others—became the main tool for nation building. In each case, particularly concerning German and English, Bible translation was vital in the growth of the vernacular and the literary language. On the centenary of the Authorized Version, Jonathan Swift (1712) acknowledged the debt of English to the Bible in translation: "if it were not for the *Bible* and *Common Prayer Book* in the vulgar Tongue, we should hardly be able to understand any Thing that was written among us an hundred Years ago: Which is certainly true: for those Books being perpetually read in Churches, have proved a kind of Standard for Language, especially to the common People. And I doubt whether the alterations since introduced, have added much to the Beauty or Strength of the *English* Tongue, though they have taken off a great deal from that *Simplicity*, which is one of the greatest Perfections in any Language."³⁴

George Steiner sums up the importance of Tyndale, the great pioneer of Bible translation into English: "Beyond Shakespeare, it is William Tyndale who [as translator of the Hebrew Bible into English in the 1530s] is begetter of the English language as we know it.... It is Tyndale's cadences, sonorities, amplitudes and concisions (he is a master of both) which, via his commanding effect on the Authorized Version, characterize global English as it is spoken and written today. No translation-act, save Luther's has been as generative of a whole language."³⁵

³³ S. J. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. N. Glatzer (New York, Schocken Books, 1970) 47.

³⁴ In W. F. Bolton, ed., *The English Language: Essays by English and American Men of Letters 1490–1839* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 117.

³⁵ George Steiner, "A Preface to the Hebrew Bible," *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1996* (London: Faber, 1996) 49.

A good knowledge of Hebrew literature is essential for a full appreciation not only of pre-twentieth-century English literature—particularly Milton, who knew Hebrew and used Hebrew sources in his poetry—but also, in many cases, of twentieth-century English literature too. For example, in D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Paul Morel, a loose self-portrait of Lawrence as a young man in Nottingham at the beginning of the twentieth century, is raised on the Bible, which has associations everywhere: “Paul never forgot ... seeing a big red moon lift itself up, slowly, between the waste road over the hill-top, steadily, like a great bird. And he thought of the Bible [Joshua 10:11–12] that the moon should be turned to blood.”³⁶ In James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), the Hebrew Bible is constantly alluded to, for example in the parodic account of Bloom’s Elijah-like theophany (cf. 2 Kings 2:11) at the end of the “Cyclops” episode: “When lo, there came about them all a great brightness and they beheld the chariot wherein He stood ascend to heaven.... And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of brightness at an angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe’s in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel.”³⁷

The fragments collected by T. S. Eliot to shore against the ruined religious civilization of Europe, in *The Waste Land* (1922), include the Hebrew Bible, specifically Ezekiel (2:1, 6:6), Ecclesiastes (12:5), and Isaiah (32:2):

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is shadow under this red rock
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

(19–30)

In George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” (1945), the main illustration of the difference between good and bad English comes from the Hebrew Bible. Here is bad English as translated from the Book of Ecclesiastes (9:11), pretentious, dishonest, slovenly, and vague: “Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be

³⁶ D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974) 98–99.

³⁷ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973) 343.

taken into account.”³⁸ Here is the same passage in the King James translation, whose superb English follows the Hebrew model: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”³⁹

ORIGINS OF ANTI-HEBRAISM. Traditionally, a Jew ignorant of Hebrew generally felt incomplete and ashamed, tried to learn it or, if unable, kept his ignorance to himself. However, among Jewish writers writing in languages other than Hebrew—above all, in English—this attitude is frequently reversed. Much creative Jewish writing in English, following the lead of German-Jewish writers, is scarred with undisguised ambivalence toward Hebrew. We have seen remarkable, often gratuitous, assertions of ignorance of Hebrew, not with contrition and shame, but at times actual pride, virtually as a badge of belonging to another culture.

Among Jewish writers, split attitudes to Hebrew became apparent in the nineteenth century: East European Jews were attached to it while the rest were mostly ignorant, indifferent, or hostile. The East European Jews who preserved Hebrew lived in a sociocultural world substantially different from that of West European Jews: they were far more numerous and were persecuted to a far greater extent. Surrounded by mostly illiterate peasants, they tended to be highly observant and subject to rabbinic authority. While their Jewish religious education was vast, their secular education was limited in contrast with West European Jews, who became increasingly urbanized and professionally trained in the course of the nineteenth century. The revival of Hebrew was primarily the achievement of the East European Jews. At the same time, most Jewish authors writing in English who expressed ignorant contempt for Hebrew have identical roots. They followed the lead not of the Hebrew writers in Eastern Europe but of the nineteenth-century German Reform whose ambivalence to Judaism, including Hebrew, and extreme German patriotism were carried over to America, where, in the absence of strong Jewish Orthodoxy, they had much influence. The attachment to the Hebrew Bible that characterizes much of Middle America is largely absent among the American Jews.

How do we interpret the recoil at Hebrew by Jewish intellectual elites? What accounts for the split in the value of Hebrew among East European Jews who looked and went east and East European Jews who looked and went west? Especially prior to World War II, Jewish writers in the West lived in fear that their assimilation and acceptance in the majority culture were jeopardized by their Jewish origins. Some declared ignorance of and distance from “foreign”

³⁸ George Orwell, *I Belong to the Left 1945*, in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. P. Davison et al. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998) 17: 425.

³⁹ Orwell 17: 425.

Hebrew culture. In contrast, Jewish writers committed to Hebrew cultural nationalism retained their love for Hebrew. Those who assimilated largely lost that love. Hostility to and denigration of Hebrew among German and English writers is sometimes caused by its association with religious backwardness compounded by poor teaching and the allure of a dominant secular culture. But these criticisms are valid to a greater or lesser extent also among East European Hebrew and Yiddish writers, most of whom had a similarly deficient education but loved Hebrew.

Why do Jews writing in English present such a narrow and distorted image of Hebrew as having little or no value? One answer lies in the desperate hopes aroused by Jewish emancipation in Continental Europe, fatally undermined by Jew-hatred. The ideal of emancipation was realized primarily in English-speaking countries, above all America. As a society of immigrants, America more than any other country gave the Jews freedom and opportunity. As one minority among many, the American Jews could assimilate into American culture with relative ease and contribute to making this culture.⁴⁰ However great Kafka was as a German writer, he could not be authentically German in his Jewishness; Bellow, in contrast, could be American in his Jewishness. America gave the Jews their best chance of removing the ancient stigma of being Jewish in Christian society and escaping anti-Jewish religious-social discrimination. Like many American Jewish immigrants, Adolf Brandeis, father of the eminent American jurist Louis D. Brandeis (1856–1941), recognized that America was unlike Europe. He came to America from Prague in 1849, in advance of his future wife, and wrote to her: “To your own surprise you will see how your hatred of your fellow-man, all your disgust at civilization, all your revulsion from the intellectual life, will drop away from you at once. You will appreciate that these feelings are solely the products of the rotten European conditions.”⁴¹

Yet, one might ask, why should Jews suppress their distinct culture in English-speaking countries, even in America, where their emancipation was mostly genuine in the long term? One answer is that *because* they were, to some extent, accepted, they were happy to follow the European model encouraged by German Reform Judaism and suppress their Jewish culture and Hebrew. Even in advanced European countries such as Germany or France, which restricted emancipation and ultimately betrayed the Jews, the renunciation of Jewish nationhood and of cultural distinctiveness as expressed in the Hebrew Bible and prayerbook was carried out by many Jews as a quid pro quo for their emancipation. In America, at least until World War II, such renunciation was

⁴⁰ See Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States 1654–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴¹ Howard Morley Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York: Dell, 1977) 167. A similar contrast between European rottenness and American vibrancy is made by Walt Whitman in his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

encouraged further by the weakness of Orthodox Judaism and the American ideal of the “melting pot” through which all minority groups could be tolerated and assimilated as American. In any case, as Jewish writers in English were writing mainly for non-Jews, their public rejection of Hebrew could reflect a wish to be accepted in a non-Jewish society and seems, at times, to reveal a willingness to adopt anti-Jewish prejudices in return. Even in America, these prejudices could be terrifying, Arthur Miller recalled of the 1930s, when he believed that “we would be destroyed by [American racism] one day, if a reaction against it didn’t materialize.”⁴²

In his autobiography, novelist Meyer Levin (1905–1981) recalled his upbringing in Chicago in the early twentieth century: “My dominant childhood memory is of fear and shame at being a Jew.”⁴³ Coming home from Hebrew class one day, he wrote a story about a man who, wrongfully accused, is jailed but escapes in a car driven by a beautiful blonde American girl. Levin interprets this story and its juxtaposition to Hebrew class: “I was seeking an escape from my Jewishness in order to prove to the world that it was no crime.”⁴⁴

Especially in the climate of hatred and discrimination that existed in the United States until World War II and lingered until the 1960s, Jewish assimilation inevitably created ambivalence to Jewish culture. The national assertiveness of some Jewish writers—a phenomenon with clear European parallels, especially in Germany—derived partly from insecurity. “I am an American, Chicago-born,” Saul Bellow trumpets in the opening of his 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March* (though Bellow was, in fact, Canadian by birth). Bellow, despite the enormous influence of the Hebrew Bible on him in childhood, was made to feel that his Jewishness was an impediment. Philip Roth recounts: “Bellow once told me that ‘somewhere in my Jewish and immigrant blood there were conspicuous traces of doubt as to whether I had the right to practice the writer’s trade.’ He suggested that, at least in part, this doubt permeated his blood because ‘our own Wasp establishment, represented mainly by Harvard-trained professors,’ considered a son of immigrant Jews unfit to write books in English. These guys infuriated him.”⁴⁵

The negative value of Hebrew among Jewish writers reflects coolness toward Judaism and Jewish culture among the first and second generations of Jewish immigrants to English-speaking countries under the pressure of assimilation and anti-Semitism. Consequently, Hebrew was often seen not as a living culture but an outmoded one, in an impoverished, even cruel educational system from which the writer felt alienated. It contrasted unfavorably with non-

⁴² Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller and Company* (London: Methuen, 1990) 30.

⁴³ Meyer Levin, *In Search: An Autobiography* (London: Constellation Books, 1951) 13.

⁴⁴ Levin 16.

⁴⁵ Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001) 142.

Jewish education. It was associated with a religion that, increasingly, was no longer observed or even respected from a distance. It was not part of a collection of mixed memories or kept up in adult life; neither was it seen in the context of Jewish history or even of specifically English literature.

The portrayal of Hebrew in English literature illustrates what was lost in the warm, medievally insular religious culture of the East European Jews. Haunted by the failure of emancipation in Europe and by the Holocaust, Jews were, and to some extent still are, vulnerable to uncertainty as to the genuineness of their assimilation into the dominant culture. The rejection of Hebrew signifies painful self-consciousness and a degree of cultural self-hate. The image of Hebrew in the diaspora has improved in recent years, partly owing to the strength of Hebrew in the State of Israel and the expansion of Jewish education in many Jewish communities. Yet, in most diaspora communities, however wealthy and highly educated, the general standard of Jewish education is mediocre, and Hebrew is practically a foreign language.