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Hebrew Typography: A Modern Progression of Language Forms

Shayna Tova Blum
Xavier University of Louisiana, sblum@xula.edu

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Hebrew Typography: A Modern Progression of Language Forms

Abstract:

In 1962, designer Eliyahu Koren completed the Koren Tanakh typeface, a block Hebrew type, influenced by studies in traditional Ashkenazi and Sephardi scripts. The typeface had been designed for the printing of the Koren Tanakh, a first edition printed Jewish Bible processed through an all-Jewish collaboration for the first time in centuries.

Koren's project was inspired by the revival of Hebrew initiated by Haskalah writers in the 18th century. Haskalah writers utilized the language and scripts of written and printed literary texts. Influenced by philosophical and political ideologies of the European Enlightenment, the Haskalah explored Jewish identity through language by defining the secular context through traditional Jewish symbolism and narratives. The Zionist movement of the next generation expanded upon the Haskalah's principles by encouraging the revival of Hebrew in oral and printed communication as a way to define Jewish identity and nationalism.

This article reviews the progression in Hebrew typography design through Zionist efforts in the Hebrew language resurgence of the 20th century, especially during the founding years of the Jewish state of Israel.

Keywords: Typography, Design, History, Hebrew, Language

Guttenberg/Typography

Typography, the design and study of alphabetic characters used in visual communication; relays a history in writing techniques and scripts that have evolved through human need and technology. The study of type is interdisciplinary in that it incorporates issues relative to society, language, psychology, and aesthetics. As phonetic icons, letterforms communicate a message to a viewer, relying on the readability and comprehension of the letters. The goal in typographic content is to draw the viewer's attention to an ideal interpretation. This is, in essence, an exchange of information between author and reader. Designer and scholar Haken Ertep writes, "Typography is the main means of expression for those who intend to create a visual representation consisting of the elements of writing… Typography has a very fundamental and contemporary place in everybody's world."[1]
During the latter 15th century, the German printer Johannes Gutenberg invented the Gutenberg printing press. By creating a movable-type system, individual letters cast from separate pieces of metal allowed characters to be appropriately organized and formatted for a printed page. Through the system, text documents were produced within an economical and methodical process that allowed work to be copied within a short period of time. Whereas scribes had previously manufactured books and documents by hand, printing with type allowed for mass production.

Gutenberg's intentions in designing the press was to assemble a first edition printed bible. However, unbeknownst to Guttenberg, his innovation revolutionized Western culture. The production of a greater quantity of reading materials within the cultural setting offered opportunities in literary accessibility, encouraging education for an illiterate population. By the 18th century, the press was commonly applied to increase production of literary texts by authors outside the church seeking to promote their scholarly ideas in philosophy and science. The population's educational growth and the disseminating of cutting-edge concepts, circling in the texts, resulted in social discourse and a cultural shift, which historians have termed the European Enlightenment.

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1 Ertep, Haken. "Typography as a Form of Cultural Representation." International Journal of the Arts in Society 6, no. 3 (2011): p45-56.

The Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment (18th-19th century), was an extension of the European Enlightenment. The Haskalah was influenced by the surfacing of ideas in religion, the humanities, and the sciences. Those participating in the Haskalah were perceived as educated rebellious youths who, having been raised within urban Jewish communities, were exposed to alternative perspectives. In large part male, the members of the Haskalah were often educated within Yeshiva, Jewish schools, placing them between two worlds in which Jewish law and tradition juxtaposed secular discourse.

The Haskalah initiated ideologies in Jewish identity and nationalism through literary documents utilizing Hebrew and Yiddish linguistic writing systems, while also addressing secular subjects. Prior to the 18th-century movement, the Hebrew oral and written language was preserved for religious practice and documentation. Jews in the diaspora had designed multilingual methods of speaking and writing, code-mixing Hebrew with the mother-tongue of the residing country. The Haskalah's methods in utilizing printed Hebrew influenced the next generation Zionist movement, founded in the late-19th century by Austrian Jew and political scholar, Theodore Herzl. As Zionist scholars and theorists considered a Jewish return to Eretz Israel, they agreed that the revival of the Hebrew language was an opportunity to proclaim unity among the Jewish people. The use of Hebrew in everyday oral and written communication was encouraged during the British mandate and was regulated in 1948 when Israel was declared a Jewish State.

Hebrew

The Hebrew alphabet is an abjad script written from right to left, consisting of twenty-two consonants with diacritical markings to indicate vowel sounds. Archaeologists have found that Hebrew alphabetic letterforms are comprised of two scripts. Paleo-Hebrew is the "original" Hebrew script, dating to approximately 800 BCE. The text is a variation of the Phoenician alphabetic script and may be viewed as symbolic linear shapes. The script was used by the Jewish population in ancient Israel and Judah, and has been preserved through the Samaritan's who have remained in the land of Israel since the first Jewish exile. Paleo-Hebrew is a phonographic alphabet system in which typographic characters define a sound. When linking letters together the characters create a word describing an action, idea, and/or object. A word, when placed together with additional words create a sentence and/or paragraph, which define the context and concept in detail. Revolutionary in its structure, Paleo-Hebrew limited the number of symbols needed to visually communicate ideas, simplifying the making of textual content.

After the exile of the Kingdom of Judah in the 6th century BCE, the Jewish scribes residing in Babylonian captivity evolved the Hebrew alphabetic script, thus exhibiting an Aramaic influence known by Jewish scholars as Ashura, "Assyrian," since the script was said to have come from Assyria. The Hebrew "square/block" script was developed in the 3rd century BCE as a stylized form of Aramaic script used in the Persian Empire. Over time, this script became the most commonly used Hebrew alphabetic script form.[2]

In religious commentary, it is believed that the Hebrew letters were the element that G-d used to create the world. Each letterform is shaped with a purpose and meaning essential to its design.[3] This theory is attributed to the thought that "the alphabet is considered eternal, pre-existent to the Earth, and the letters are seen as having holiness and power... and thus, they cannot be destroyed." This theory assumes that the Hebrew alphabet was the first visual language to exist. However, archaeological findings have indicated that the Phoenicians created the first twenty-two letter alphabet in 1300 BCE. From the Phoenician alphabet, three alphabets were created: Greek (circa 1100 BCE), ancient Hebrew (circa 900 BCE), and Aramaic (8th century BCE).[4] The invention of alphabets revolutionized written communication; for the first time, a limited selection of twenty-two characters was needed to formulate a word representing an action, thing, or idea. The writing system was simple and progressive and eliminated the need for complex pictographic messaging that had been used for centuries prior.

2 Herber Danby, ed., The Mishna (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 202.
3 Handelzalts, M. In the Beginning: The Origins of the Hebrew Alphabet, Haaretz, Aug 04, 2013 1:10 PM, https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1.539683.

After the destruction of the second Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people, Hebrew continued to be used by the religious for religious purposes; however, the common Jew used a mixed dialect of Hebrew and the language of their location; for example, Ashkenazi Jews (from Eastern European) spoke Yiddish, a synthesis of German and Hebrew. Sephardic Jews (from the Iberian Peninsula) spoke Ladino, a linguistic mix of Spanish and Hebrew. And Mizrahi Jews (from North African and the Middle East) spoke a blended code-mixing of Hebrew and Spanish. In all cases, while religious/Jewish texts would be printed in Hebrew, alternative writings would spell out the language using the local alphabetic characters. The Hebrew alphabet was kept sacred by the Jewish population within the diaspora. While Jewish scholars and intellectuals continued speaking fluency in the language, the overall Jewish population of the diaspora took on their surrounding local language. However, the common people were taught and Hebrew verses and the Hebrew alphabet. They were taught basic Hebrew for the reciting of prayers. This evolution of the language remained for two millennia until the 19th-century development of the Haskalah movement, as well as the rise in Zionism and its campaign to promote Jewish identity.

"When Zionism warmed up to the idea of speaking Hebrew, the idea was wrapped into a heroic story of an ancient language."[5] At the beginning of the 20th century, the Zionist movement in Europe and the United States grew in response to the growth of anti-Semitism throughout Europe. Greater possibilities of founding a Jewish state in Eretz Israel progressed. As part of the initiative, Jews immigrating to the land of Eretz Israel were persuaded to fully assimilate to their Jewish identity by removing the language of their exiled state. They were encouraged to take on the language of the Jewish people, Hebrew.

The use of Hebrew as a national language for Israel was a strategy to unite Jewish settlers who spoke Yiddish, Ladino, and Arabic.[6] Some believed that the "new" Jewish nation of Israel would be born and would subsequently re-establish its spiritual and cultural roots through the primary use of Hebrew as a national language.[7] Writer Menachem Mavshan wrote in 1919, "only Hebrew could turn the Jewish people in Palestine from a mere herd into a nation." Like most Zionist thinkers of this time, the use of Hebrew as a spoken language was seen as a national tool, one that was encouraged to be learned through schools and written literature. Zionists believed that by replacing the languages of the Jewish Diaspora with Hebrew meant the creation of the "new Jew."[8] Many felt the use of Hebrew as a national language promoted an idealized Jewish identity.

The revival of Hebrew, referring to the everyday spoken and written use of the language in Eretz Israel from the late 19th century onward, is seen by many as "miraculous" and is a formal element of the cultural and national symbol of the Jewish people. As Hebrew was used for centuries purely in religious texts and scriptures, Zionists saw a challenge in reviving the language when placed in competition with the many mother tongues of the Diaspora Jews. Ultimately, the Jews of Palestine were prevented from using their native tongue as an attempt to assimilate all Jews into one national culture from their multitude of ethnic differences. "[Jewish] immigrants and refugees should be required to assimilate into Jewish Palestine and to properly learn Hebrew." The language should dominate the public and private spheres, including the individual's thought process, since "only original thinking in Hebrew could create the 'new Jew.'"9

5 Handelzalts, M. In the Beginning: The Origins of the Hebrew Alphabet, Haaretz, Aug 04, 2013 1:10 PM, https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1.539683.
6 Safran, William. "Language and nation-building in Israel: Hebrew and its rivals." Nations and Nationalism 11, no. 1 (2005): 43-63.
7 Levine, E. "Writing in Hebrew," World Literature Today: Hebrew Literature in the 1990s 72, no. 3 (1998). p479-484.
8 Helman, A. "Even the Dogs in the Street Bark in Hebrew: National Ideology and Everyday Culture in Tel-Aviv," The Jewish Quarterly Review, XCII, nos. 3-4 (2002).
9 Helman, A. "Even the Dogs in the Street Bark in Hebrew: National Ideology and Everyday Culture in Tel-Aviv," The Jewish Quarterly Review, XCII, nos. 3-4 (2002).

Modern Hebrew Type

The beginning of the 20th century provided a space for the progression of Hebrew typography as the possibilities of Israel becoming a Jewish state increased efforts in the promotion of a Hebrew revival. Unlike the historical transformation of Latin letterforms, which had been studied and anatomically structured since the Renaissance, Hebrew type did not experience major historical reform and improvements. According to Adi Stern, President of Bezelel Academy in Jerusalem, "The rules that regulated the writing of Hebrew text caused very little processes of change." During the 20th century, however, a thorough examination of the Hebrew script from Jewish historical documents and objects resulted in the experimentation of Hebrew typeface designs.

An increased population of immigrants influenced the growth of industry, in Eretz Israel, and necessities in the production of documents created a demand in the designing of modern Hebrew typography. Letterforms were to be perceived as complementary to the Jewish cultural identity and where developed through the research of ancient and historical texts. The favoured typographic styles integrated two major Hebrew scripts; Ashkenazi, formed in Europe, was influenced by Blackletter, a Medieval Gothic writing system used in Christian illuminated manuscripts. Letterforms were blocked with thick, bold horizontal strokes and contrasting thin vertical lines extending at the edge. In contrast, Sephardi script, developed in the Iberian Peninsula, the Middle East and North Africa, was influenced by Arabic calligraphy by which letterforms were placed closely together, appearing delicate with soft, organic curvilinear lines.

Eliyahu Koren, graphic designer and typographer, immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1933, to escape rising anti-Semitism in Europe. Born in Nuremberg, Germany in 1907, Koren had studied art and design at the Kunstschule der Stadt Nurnberg, and upon graduation, he held the position of Professor's Assistant at the university. In 1936, after settling in Jerusalem, Koren founded the Graphics Department at the Jewish National Fund, a not-for-profit organization established in 1901 to purchase land for environmental prosperity in Israel. Shortly thereafter, he was approached by the President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to design a typeface and new edition Tanakh, which was intended to symbolically support Jewish national identity in Israel. After having worked on the project for several years, the Hebrew University chose to cease the process and instead re-printed a previous-edition Bible created in England by a Non-Jewish printer. Koren continued to work independently on the project and, in 1957, left the Jewish National Fund to establish a studio where he committed himself to the challenge of the Koren Bible Type and Tanakh project.

The design of the Koren Tanakh typeface and the printing of the first Koren Tanakh took place in 1962, when, for the first time in nearly five hundred years, a Jewish Bible was processed through an all-Jewish collaboration. The historical significance and the success in the type and book design resulted in the project receiving wide acclaim. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion stated, "Israel is redeemed from shame… (it) is the first Jewish Bible (created by Jews) in the last 400 years." Ben-Gurion declared the Koren Tanakh as the official book in which Israeli Presidents would be sworn into office.

During early statehood, institutions were formed, requiring the skills of type designers to produce printed documents for national institutions; posters, stamps, banknotes. Israel encouraged production in visual materials to support the Hebrew revival and the "New Jewish" identity through language, symbolism, and allegory, requiring designers to examine the text and design of archaeological artefacts, ancient objects and texts, and biblical manuscripts. Koren studied traditional Hebrew, Sephardi and Ashkenazi scripts, and integrated the styles with modern Latin type design methods. The Koren Bible typeface was created with efficiencies in aesthetics and ease of user readability for the purpose of printing a modern national publication of the Hebrew Tanakh. After several years developing the typeface design, Koren completed the Koren Bible type with a traditional Hebrew block letter, ornamented similarly to a serif. This presented a medium weight form with soft even lines and limited contrast. To assist in readability and typographic page hierarchy, Koren created multiple weights for letterform printing.

The Koren Bible type was notably the first Hebrew typeface designed for one specific purpose, typesetting the new Hebrew Tanakh. Within a short period from its public induction, the Koren Bible type was noted as one of the most successful Hebrew letterform designs. The Koren Tanakh was one of the most significant print productions in modern Jewish culture. By 1967, a bilingual Koren

Chumash was launched using both Hebrew and English texts, and by 1981, Koren Publishers Jerusalem printed the first Koren Siddur using the new Koren Siddur typeface. Eliyahu Koren was awarded the prestigious Jerusalem Prize for his achievements in Hebrew design and publication printing in 1998.

Conclusion

The efforts of the Haskalah and Zionist movements in establishing the revival of the Hebrew language for Jewish identity and nationalism was practical in that it unified a linguistically diverse population of diasporic Jews immigrating to Eretz Israel from various parts of the globe. When the Jewish state of Israel was officially founded in 1948 and institutions where developed, the necessity of printed Hebrew text increased. This resulted in an innovative climate for Hebrew typography and design. The work produced served a national purpose and developed systematically. Scholars studied the history of Hebrew characters from Paleo-Hebrew, Ashkenazi, and Sephardi scripts.

Discussing the history of Hebrew typography through the lens of Jewish identity and nationalism impacts the study of design and technology in global cultures. Future examination of this subject would address the historical progression of Hebrew scripts through religious and secular texts, an analysis of Israeli and Hebrew type designers, and an investigation into Hebrew visual communication within urban culture.

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