"SACRED TONGUE" OR "FOREIGN LANGUAGE"? THE AMERICAN JEWISH STUDENT AND CONTEMPORARY HEBREW LITERATURE[1]

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> In the competition between the two separate institutions of education, the general and the Hebrew, the former had the upper hand. Why? Because of its naturalness, the product of social and existential realities, and because of its apparent usefulness in the struggle for survival.
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> —"As youngsters we had understood"—my son told me many years later—"that our general education was of great importance, both socially and economically, so we were serious about it, while Hebrew had only limited relevance for our life."
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> For those young intellectuals, general literature seemed of much higher value than Hebrew. For us, the generation trained in the old world, Hebrew was the center of our life and our mental world; but for the young generation, their place of residence became their center.[2]

The speaker is Zvi Scharfstein, a well-known Hebrew educator in New York between the wars, and the father of Professor Ben-Ami Scharfstein of Tel Aviv University, the "son" whose retort is quoted here. This was Scharfstein senior's attempt to rationalize the changes that had taken place already in the forties in the attitude toward Hebrew language and literature: the gap between his own generation, who had emigrated from Europe during the first world war, and their children, the first American-born generation.

[1]An earlier Hebrew version of this paper was presented as a forum lecture in Jerusalem on August 15, 1989, under the auspices of the International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization, and was published in the periodical *'Am vaSefer* (Brit Ivrit Olamit, Jerusalem: 1991), pp. 85–96.

[2]Zvi Scharfstein, *'Arba'im Shanah ba'America* (Massada, 1956), p. 287. (My translation—Y. F.)

Writing in the fifties, in his memoirs *Forty Years in America* (published in Israel in Hebrew, of course!), he still did not have a convincing explanation for the difference between the European diaspora and the American one: why was Hebrew relegated to the margins in the life of young American Jews? Was it only because of its uselessness "in the struggle for survival"? Its "unnaturalness"? Its "lower value" in relation to general literature? —So why hadn't the older generation felt all of that in their own youth in Europe?

A partial answer to this question was given a couple of years ago, in Robert Alter's study *The Invention of Hebrew Prose:*

> [B]ut as anyone can attest who has had the opportunity to know the emigre Hebraists in New York as recently as the 1950s, these writers, displaced from their *multilingual* setting, were doomed to declaim sonorous Hebrew cadences in a historical vacuum. In an essentially *monolingual* country that offered relatively open access to people of talent, those with literary gifts in the younger generation [...] would of course be drawn to the dominant language. The older Hebraists, then, were left brandishing a literary torch with no one to whom they could pass it on.[3]

Professor Alter's thesis is best demonstrated by his own book: who would have thought it possible, in the not too distant past, to publish such a meticulous analysis of Hebrew style *in English*? Today, however, Alter's book is not an exception.[4] These days, more than ever before, it is language proficiency (rather than mere interest) that is a rare commodity. This can be readily "proven" by the growing translation industry and the relatively wide exposure given to Israeli books on the pages of the *New York Times*: close to 30 Israeli novels were published in English in the span of two or three years, and at least half of them were reviewed by major American papers. So we witness a growing interest in Hebrew cultural products simultaneously with a waning ability to satisfy this interest in the original language. But can we accept the monolingual nature of American culture as the sole cause for the loss of Hebrew vitality? Didn't the canonization of Hebrew as the official language of the State of Israel detract from the romantic halo that had formerly surrounded its diaspora loyalists? Indeed, this is precisely the view put forward by Arnold Band, in his acceptance speech for the 1989 Friedman Prize awarded him by the Histadrut Ivrit of America:

> Hebrew was the most cherished asset ... to which Jews have held in their encounters with the cultures surrounding them. In fact, for both [Isaac] Silberschlag and [Nahum] Glatzer Hebrew was not just another language

[3]Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Invention of Realism* (University of Washington Press, 1988), p. 73. (Emphasis mine—Y. F.)

[4]See on this point my review of his book, *Modern Fiction Studies* (Purdue University Press, Winter 1991).

> among others. They both saw it as sacred, albeit in different ways, each in accordance with his own ideology....
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> [But] in the fifties, our Hebrew world had totally turned about.... On one hand, Hebrew had changed from a sacred tongue into a normal "foreign language," spoken and written by citizens of a state formally recognized by the United Nations.... On the other hand, the Jewish community had so thoroughly established itself in America that most Jews saw themselves as fully-fledged citizens, whose language was no other than English. Under these circumstances it was convenient to describe Hebrew in America as a foreign language; convenient—but also dangerous ... [for] if upon the establishment of Israel Hebrew was given a place in almost every American university, the number of students actually learning Hebrew has dramatically decreased in the last seven years.[5]

Published in *HaDoar*, the oldest Hebrew journal (appearing in New York since 1920!), this wistful summary demonstrates its own message: on one hand, vital activities, an ostensibly thriving Hebrew press, awards, new academic chairs and departments for Hebrew and Judaica; and on the other hand—a glaring decrease in the number of students who are willing to invest "labor and devotion," in Professor Band's words, in the acquisition of this difficult "foreign language."

No doubt, the transition from "sacred tongue" to "foreign language" has already left its mark on the American academy: while among the older generation, those trained in the forties and fifties, fluency in Hebrew is not rare (and this also among scholars in adjacent fields, such as Bible and History, not only in Hebrew literature!), this is not true for the younger generation, and even less so for the next generation, the one currently in training. We are facing today an absurd situation in which positions in Hebrew are slow to be filled; and as for the prognosis for the near future, this is not much better, considering the dearth of American students among our few Ph.D. candidates. In most departments there is a popular demand, sometimes astounding in its proportions, for certain core Jewish topics—Bible, Holocaust, even contemporary literature—as long as they are taught in English and texts are read in translation: "Alexandria of America," as defined by Professor Gershon Shaked in the latest edition of his (Hebrew) book *No Other Place*.[6]

Here, however, is the place to point out an exception, drawn from my experience at Columbia University throughout the 1980s. As in many other areas, New York is a world unto itself. I have often heard the question, asked

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[5]Avraham Band, "My Road to Hebrew," *HaDoar* 68 (May 26, 1989), pp. 15–16. (My translation—Y. F.)

[6]Gershon Shaked, *'Ein Makom 'Aher* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1988), pp. 140 *et passim*.

in sheer surprise, both here and in Israel: "Do you really teach Hebrew literature *in Hebrew*? To whom?" Just as surprised were my colleagues from the Midwest, for instance, when I used to tell them that at Columbia there was no real interest in courses in translation. Courses of Hebrew literature *in Hebrew*, by contrast, could draw up to 25 students in the lower-level classes, and about a dozen in the higher-level classes.

What I am suggesting, then, is that we have two different groups of students and two diverging kinds of motivation: on one hand, there is the all-American campus, in which the study of Hebrew—among other languages—is in decline, often aggravated by the elimination of foreign-language requirements; in such campuses the only way for the Jewish (or the non-Jewish) student to get to our subject matter is via courses in translation. On the other hand, there is the population graduating from Hebrew day schools and Yeshivot, who are fully equipped for the perusal of Hebrew texts, ancient as well as modern, and whom we meet mostly on the East Coast. Since it is the latter group that I know best, I would like to devote most of this presentation to the specific problems they raise, and only hint at some overlapping with other campus populations.

Typical Yeshiva graduates are mainly concerned to retain their Hebrew language proficiency; some of them are also interested in extending their familiarity with Hebrew literature. In principle, this group could have produced candidates for graduate studies in Hebrew literature—they are generally well suited for such an undertaking both linguistically and culturally. But this rarely happens. As a rule, the Jewish education system does *not* encourage serious engagement in belles lettres. In all my years at Columbia, and more recently at New York University, I have not met more than a handful of students with interest in literary matters. Still, it would be unfair to put the whole blame on Jewish education alone. Ironically, its attitude to literature is unexpectedly backed by the all-American university, specifically by what Tzvetan Todorov has called its "Crimes Against Humanities."[7]

According to Professor Todorov's findings, the last two decades saw a decrease of 33 percent in the number of college students graduating in the humanities; 88 percent of all college graduates have never taken a course in "Western Civilization," "American History," or "Foreign Language." So why should we malign our Jewish students?

The majority of these students opt for a degree in medicine, law, business administration, or at least computers. An academic career is definitely

[7]Tzvetan Todorov, "Crimes Against Humanities," *The New Republic* (July 3, 1989), pp. 26–30. This essay is just a tip of the iceberg—one aspect of the raging debate over the canon and the curriculum in the American university that is focused on the humanities.

beyond their scope, not to mention a career in the humanities. In contrast to the youngsters in Scharfstein's times, they do not think about any "literature," either Hebrew or general. What makes them come to us is something totally different. *Hebrew* literature attracts them, not "literature." For some of them it is *Israeli* literature, without all its historical dowry; for others, just the reverse: they are sharply critical of our "young" literature (from the sixties on), the likes of which, they claim, "we can also read in American literature."

Put differently: with some exceptions, our typical students bring to class their problems of ethnic identity. Both their identification and objection stem from this source. Generally speaking, they lack any readiness for a critical-objective inquiry. Moreover, very often they transfer to the modern text an attitude of reverence and awe that they have acquired at the Yeshiva or Hebrew school, and since the literary text does not properly "respond," they react with indignation and alienation.

It is this problem, then, that challenges us as teachers and scholars: how is the teacher—who is often an Israeli and generally a product of one of the "isms" of the last half-century (Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, Post-Modernism)—to get through to the American student who generally comes to us for emotional rather than intellectual reasons?

How should the teacher cope with the student's usual "innocence," his total oblivion to the hard questions recently raised about language and literature in general, along with her/his naive expectations of Hebrew literature in particular?

Questions of this sort arouse heated debates, debates that keep surfacing in almost every professional meeting and every panel devoted to the teaching of Hebrew literature. Often enough a debate of this kind would revolve around methodological arguments; my feeling is, however, that such arguments tend to miss the main issue.

Rather, what I would like to propose is that the major problem is not means and methods but aims and positions. At the center of our difficulty, as I see it, is a fundamental conflict, both emotional and cognitive, between the position of the average teacher and the position of the average student. For the typical student of the group I am discussing, Hebrew still functions as a "sacred tongue," if not technically then emotionally. Hebrew literature is the object of expectations that are qualitatively different from the expectations he/she has of any other literature; it is expected to reflect some ideal reality that corresponds to the readers' perceptions of their own self-identity. It is therefore not amenable to any comparison, it cannot be studied in a relativistic framework; like the "chosen people," it is *sui generis*. Rules of any "science of literature" cannot apply to it. It is a natural continuity of an internal tradition of thousands of years, and not a member in the international club of belles lettres, criticism, and theory of literature. As such, it is

"obliged" more to the Jewish tradition than to the world of general literature, with its laws and concepts.

At best, a student of this group would care more about the line leading from the conflicts of the *talush* ("the uprooted") at the beginning of the century to the conflicted protagonists of Israeli fiction, than the line leading, for example, from the European Theatre of the Absurd to the Israeli drama of Nissim Aloni and Hanoch Levin; and a class on biblical motifs in medieval and contemporary poetry would be more relevant than the classification and elucidation of techniques of deautomatization, of clusters of imagery and arch-metaphors, or of patterns of intertextuality and transfer from *foreign* sources in the very same poetry.[8] It is only natural for such students to regard as secondary or insignificant the whole question of literary form, of "how," of the "literariness" that scholars have been toiling to define since the beginning of this century. What they look for in literature is *reflection*, not *semiotics*; *values*, not *models*; *ideals*, not *defamiliarization*.

I hope there is no need to clarify that my exemplary pairs of oppositions are themselves an artificial construct, the result of any number of doctrinaire approaches. My sense is, however, that many teachers are not aware that they themselves exacerbate this polarization by taking a no less doctrinaire stance on the other side of the opposition.

The reason for this, I believe, is the fact that in one way or another the majority of the contemporary academic faculty currently teaching Hebrew were trained by twentieth-century pseudo-scientific approaches to literature. As a rule, our apprenticeship has not prepared us for coping with such "irrelevant" questions as "But why is Hebrew literature so 'grim'?" or "Why is the Israeli literary self-image so negative?". Here we cannot rely on any taxonomies or "grammars" of rhetorical and stylistic structures. Here one needs to take off one's scholarly hat and try to step into the students' shoes—or rather into their internal world of turmoil and confusion.

This is more easily said than done. For nothing is as efficient as the "objectivity" of scientific research in defending against the unsettling questions of identity, values, and ideology. An argument one often hears, for example, may run like this: "It is not my job to solve the students' identity problems; I teach a college course in literature, not a workshop in Jewish ethnicity." Ironically, the context of this contention, which I quote from memory, was a paper on the use of Joshua Sobol's play "The Night of the

[8]These sample topics represent some of the themes I have developed in my courses and research, respectively. For the latter see my "The Sacred as the Absurd in Israeli Drama," *Sacred Theatre*, eds. Daniel Gerould et al. (New York, 1989), pp. 81–97; *Modernism and Cultural Transfer* (Cincinnati, 1986).

Twenties" in a course on "Israeli Myth: The Dream and Its Aftermath" (!).[9] I suppose the speaker never asked herself why she called a course by this title; or, more fundamentally, whether this topic could be taught from the perspective implied by her statement. And finally, has she really chosen Sobol's play for its esthetic merit? I sincerely doubt this.[10]

Indeed, what we face here is almost a contradiction in terms. And this is by no means the only case. The heated exchange that followed the presentation of that paper attests, in my opinion, to an unconscious conflict between the desirable—according to certain academic standards—and the available—the ideological matrix not only of our students' expectations but also of sizable portions of our cultural inheritance.

This is not the place to rehash the ramifications of this conflict and its expressions in contemporary Hebrew literature and criticism. I would only like to emphasize that although a few years ago it still seemed possible to establish an edifice of objective-esthetic research that would function as a defense against the pressures of the outside world, and that *HaSifrut (Literature)*—the Israeli journal best representing this approach—was going to be revived, today it is clear that such hopes have no basis in reality. That literary journal has not revived, while Israeli literature at large is bending under the weight of current events.[11] Literary scholarship itself now seems to "betray" scientific-esthetic ideals and adopt new "cultural" (rather than purely literary) research avenues.[12] In this it echoes several post-structuralist premises and methodologies (e.g., "critique of the canon" or "critique of ideology"), that seem to me appropriate in addressing some of the difficulties we grapple with in teaching Hebrew literature in the American university.

It should come as no surprise that several of the didactic solutions proposed in the panel discussion following the paper referred to above (see note 9) did point in similar directions. It was suggested, for example, that the interweaving of non-canonic sources (films, popular or documentary

[9]Edna Amir-Coffin, "Theatre in a Course on Literature and Cinema," a paper given at the Annual Methodology Meeting of NAPH, Chicago, May 1989.

[10]On the ideological aspects of Sobol's play see my "Zionism—Neurosis or Cure?—The 'Historical' Drama of J. Sobol." *Prooftexts* 7:2 (May 1987), pp. 145-162.

[11]I have developed this point in a series of articles; see especially "Poetics and Politics: Israeli Literary Criticism Between East and West," *PAAJR* 52 (1985), pp. 9-35; "Back to Vienna: Zionism on the Literary Couch," *Vision Confronts Reality*, eds. Ruth Kozodoy *et al.* (New York, 1989), pp. 310-335.

[12]See, for example, Dan Miron, *'Im Lo Tihye Yerushalayim* [If There is No Jerusalem] (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987); Shaked, *No Other Place*; and collections of essays by writers Zach, Yehoshua, Oz, and scholars Gertz and Calderon, among others.

literature) might soften (or balance) the extreme self-criticism of the canonic literature. These very sources may also help clarify how thin boundaries may at times be between literary imagination and historical reality. A film documenting the dialogue of some old-time pioneers may demonstrate how life and art overlap in ideological rhetoric. From here it is but a short step to theories of New Historicism and their claim that the narrative and tropological dimensions of historiography question the traditional polarization between literature and history.[13]

Last, but not least, was the suggestion to call students' attention to other literatures that were written *under conditions and in a socio-historical context similar* to those of the Hebrew literature under scrutiny. In some sense, Israeli literature, despite its declared westernization, still adheres to the Russian tradition of a literature engaged in the socio-political discourse. But we would be mistaken to limit ourselves to this line of historical continuity. For even a most superficial look should suffice to convince us that this tradition is not exclusively Russian, or even East-European. And even though our students may be mostly familiar with *contemporary* American literature, it is important to direct them to earlier literature of the American pioneering period. Just as valuable is the literature inspired by the two world wars or Vietnam, as well as the literatures of Central Europe or South America that reflect similar realities of a society under internal or external pressures. Thus, for example, the fictional autobiography, a genre believed to be the most westernly individualistic, turns out to be quite different, not only in Hebrew but also among western *women* writers or other non-mainstream groups in the West.[14] In other words, contemporary Hebrew literature calls for literary frames of reference other than the ones automatically used by the average American student.

The common denominator underlying the various didactic suggestions enumerated here is the comparative method. In my experience, there is no better way to neutralize positions of defense and resistance than by directing students to a comparative reading. My personal solution for the problems raised above is to plan each of the courses I teach, even when taught in Hebrew, as if it were a course in comparative literature. And if limitations of time do not allow for the inclusion of primary reading from other literatures in class discussion, they are given at least as background reading, to help in

[13] See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978).

[14] See my "Ideology and Self-Representation: The Case of Israeli Women Writers," in *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction*, eds. Janice Morgan and Colette Hall (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 281–301.

framing the discussion; similarly, secondary sources include readings in English, aimed at relevant issues in other cultures.

For the very same purpose I have established another rule in planning my classes: I rarely teach thematic courses. In contrast to the methodology described a few years ago by Gilead Morahg,[15] I have found it impossible to implement a graded program in which the same student progresses annually from lower to higher-level courses. To the best of my knowledge, only few universities enjoy such a privilege. Most of our students are not majors, so we see them for one elective, or two courses at the most. Their knowledge of Hebrew literature is dispersed, and at best they recognize some disparate names—Bialik, Agnon, Amichai, perhaps Amos Oz. They totally lack, however, even a rudimentary conception of modern cultural history (in pre-modern history they are generally better), not to speak about basic terms in literary criticism. My experience with this crowd has been that courses defined thematically have almost always courted the danger of evolving into an ideologically colored query, altogether neglecting the literary–esthetic dimensions of the material. A "generic" definition, on the other hand (the short story, poetic modernism, fictional autobiography) warrants a minimal exploration of the relevant literary concepts (the stylistic, structural, and rhetorical components of the genre) and encourages a comparative reading with the help of appropriate critical sources.

At the same time, I do not approach the genre synchronically. I present the primary sources chronologically, so that every course is structured also as an introduction, a minuscule cultural history of an issue in Hebrew literature. Although the historical section is narrow, it is nevertheless a significant ploy, as it opens up the conversation to questions of culture, history, and ideology that a purely synchronic inquiry wouldn't have called into attention. And it is precisely through these questions that I have been able to reach the students' existential anxieties—to domesticate them rather than alienate them, to cope with them rather than to ignore them.

If this sounds too good to be true, this is indeed the case. My "wonder formula" is not exempt from drawbacks. The major complaint I have heard over the years was that the broad historical scope does not allow for an in-depth acquaintance with one or two authors. To make up for this, I usually suggest that the term paper be used for such an exploration of a single author; another option is to return to the department for another class; and a third one is, of course, to take courses of literature in translation. But with

[15] Gilead Morahg, "Teaching Hebrew Literature to American Undergraduates," *Methodology in the Academic Teaching of Judaism*, ed. Zev Garber (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 145–164.

this we have reached what is for me still an unresolved issue in the teaching of Hebrew literature in America.

Why "unresolved"? Technically, the answer is quite apparent: How can one plan a serious comprehensive course when so many core texts are still unavailable in English? I say "still," because the situation has much improved in the last couple of years, when major portions of Israeli literature, mainly prose and drama, have been and are being translated. In poetry there are several translated collections, and chief among them T. Carmi's *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (1981) and the new edition, by Harvard University Press, of *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (1989).

This is all very helpful, but not enough. What is being translated is mostly *contemporary* literature. In any of the "generic" courses that I try to structure I still miss a central link: here Agnon, there Brenner, or Yizhar, and beyond them, works by women writers. Is it conceivable to teach in today's America an introductory course of any kind without exploring the question of gender difference (or non-difference)? And I don't even want to dwell on the number of students we "lose" by not being able to give courses on "Women's Literature in Israel," simply because the works are not translated.

But this is, I would like to reiterate, only the technical aspect of the issue. The principal problem is, naturally, the fear—the fear lurking between the lines of Shaked's chapter on "Alexandria of America" (see note 5): If today teachers read the original while students use a translation, what will happen in the next generation? Already now "commentaries are written on translated texts" (Shaked, p. 143), "and everyone scrutinizes them as if they were the originals . . ." Aren't we risking even more the unpromising future of Hebrew in America (and in other diasporas)? Aren't we assisting the dangerous process described by Band as the transition from "sacred tongue" to "foreign language"? Don't we offer our students the way of least resistance instead of encouraging them to cope with original texts?

I assume that it was this kind of reasoning that directed the actions of the first generation of Hebraists who established the "Hebrew in Hebrew" programs in the American universities. In the name of this reasoning they have also objected to the transition from Hebraica to "Jewish Studies." The fear was that the transfer of emphasis to social and contemporary studies—fields that do not require knowledge of the classical sources—would be at the expense of the investment needed for the mastery of the language and the ancient texts required in the study of Judaica.

I do not know if this fear was unfounded. But at the same time, I am not sure that the perception of cause and effect underlying this fear is accurate. In the final analysis, we have to regretfully acknowledge the fact that, without some revolutionary changes in the academic language-level teaching, we

cannot expect college students who begin Hebrew with the basics to reach a level of mastery that will enable them to study literature qua literature. Moreover, I suspect this is not a new phenomenon; I do not think the academy has ever supplied its own advanced students in Hebrew and Judaica. Acknowledging this fact should help us (and me) realize that classes of translated literature have another function altogether. They are geared to a different audience and should not constitute a "threat" for the Yeshivot graduates who can read the material in the original.

What is this distinct function of classes using translated texts, then?

First and foremost, to accompany the lower-level language classes. Had it been in my power, I would have made them a formal requirement, the way it exists in some European universities (Cambridge, for instance). But since this option is not available to us in the democracy of the American academy, all we have left is the way of "seduction." What I mean by this is a conscious response to the cultural and literary codes that the American student absorbs in other areas of her/his academic studies. It should come as no surprise that popular topics (such as "the Holocaust," "the other," "gender and culture") draw also students who have no specific interest in Judaica, Israel, or Hebrew. This means, naturally, that we should expect a class different not only in its language but in its didactic and social dynamics as well.

My experience with courses of this kind (mostly on the graduate level, though) has been very gratifying, and in ways I had not originally foreseen. Attracting students with a variety of specialties and ethno-cultural backgrounds, these "mixed" classes have often turned into a fascinating exercise in self reflection. The interaction with "others" usually drives both students and teacher into an overall examination of generally unquestioned presuppositions (us/them; male/female; objective/subjective; self/other). As such, these classes offer a healthy counterbalance to the enclosed, parochial atmosphere that sometimes marks our Hebrew courses. At the same time, they also reach out to those who "would otherwise never have known about this literature," as a newly "converted" enthusiast has recently told me.

This may not be a major breakthrough for Hebrew studies per se; but reaching out, shaking up some rigid perceptions and boundaries, are humanistic gains not to be underrated in this day and age. And if Hebrew texts can perform this feat— if only in translation—let this be our consolation.