

**Kolelyah - a Hebrew Name for an Institution Where the Voice [kol] of God,
the LORD [El Yah], is heard**

Words of *Torah* and *todah* on receiving an honorary degree
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In 1913, at the Zionist Congress, an idea was born: to establish a Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1918, its cornerstone was laid. The university opened its doors seven years later, on April 1, 1925, at a festive ceremony attended by leaders, intellectuals, and dignitaries — the leaders of the Jewish world and the Zionist movement, heads of the local Jewish community, and scientists and scholars from across the world. Among the participants were Dr. Chaim Weizmann, Lord Balfour, Viscount Allenby, Sir Herbert Samuel, Albert Einstein, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, and many others.

And who did not come? And why? Eliezer Ben-Yehudah. He was opposed to the term used in Hebrew: *universita*. He thought that a “*bet midrash* of the highest level for scholarly and scientific studies” was worthy of the term מִיְּלָלָה (*mikhlala*). In this battle, he suffered defeat.... In his dictionary, under the entry *mikhlala* are the terms in French (*université*), German (*Universität*), and English (*university*), accompanied by the note: “in common use in Hebrew speech in Eretz Yisrael.”¹ Those in the know recognize that note as an expression of a complex reality, and suggest that it should be read as: “in common use among the members of the Ben-Yehuda family and some of their friends.”²

Forty years before that, a generation earlier, in 1875 (the year in which Eliezer Ben-Yehuda turned 18 and when there was not yet a single Hebrew-speaking school or preschool) was the founding in Cincinnati, Ohio, under the leadership of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, of the Hebrew Union College. In 1950, it amalgamated with the

¹ Elieser Ben-Iehuda, *Thesaurus totius hebraicitatis et veteris et recentioris* [Hebrew], vol. 6 (Tel Aviv: La'am 1948-1959), 2992.

² See Yoseph Lang, *Speak Hebrew!: The Life of Eliezer Ben Yehuda* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2008). [Hebrew]

Jewish Institute of Religion to form the Hebrew Union College – Institute of Jewish Religion, the name by which we know it today. In appreciation of the honor of receiving a degree from this institution, which here in Jerusalem offers, among its many varied programs, preparation for rabbinic ordination and for cantorial investiture, I would like to bestow upon it a gift in the name of the Hebrew language - a new Hebrew name: כּוֹלֵלְיָהּ *kolelyah*, which might also be spelled in a way that is particularly fitting for the cantorial program: קוֹל-אֱלֹהִים (“voice of God, the LORD”).

It is unclear what will become of my neologism; Eliezer Ben-Yehuda’s *mikhlala* did not get lost, but instead found a home elsewhere, as the accepted term for “college.” In contrast, the term תֵּאֲדַע בְּדַע *te’avde’a* from the words for “hunger, desire, passion” and “knowledge”), which he suggested for “curious,” did not succeed in making its way, not to universities and not to colleges. The term *te’avde’a* does announce the place the heart desires to be, while סַקְרָן (*sakran*—the accepted term for “curious”) means “one who surveys or scans everything, always,” and it appears in an early midrash, Genesis Rabbah §18, in the context of God’s deliberation about which organ would be used to create woman: “I shall not create her from the eye, lest she be a סַקְרָנִית (*sakranit*—feminine form of *sakran*).”

I sense that this degree is being bestowed not just upon me, by dint of my involvement with Hebrew exegetical discourse, but because the furtherance of the subject, my life’s passion and mission: the cultivation of the Hebrew language as way of enriching the renewed identity of the Jewish people in Israel and as an avenue for the cultivation of its relationship with the world—in short, *am ve’olam*³, our people and the entire world.

What characterizes the Hebrew that we speak?

Hebrew is ancient tongue, one of the few that have survived and are still spoken, a language that never died, nor was it in a coma; it had not even sunken into a deep sleep. Contrary to the lovely image offered by Amos Oz, Hebrew is not a Sleeping Beauty that lay waiting for its Zionist knight, but rather it is the Promised Tongue. It is a deep-rooted language (in more than one sense), a promise of growth and flowering.

³ *Am Olam* - The Eternal People

I have chosen one lone example taken from a lesser-known period, from an anthology edited by Tova Rosen. This is the unusual prayer of a man who longs to become a woman, which appears in the well-known medieval work *Even Boḥan* (“Touchstone” c. 1322) by the Hebrew writer and translator Kalonymus ben Kalonymus:

Our Father in Heaven /
 who performed miracles for our fathers with fire and water,
You overturned Ur of the Chaldees so it would not burn [Abraham] in its heat /
 And You turned Dinah [from male to female] in her mother’s innards
And You turned the staff into a snake before the eyes of thousands of myriads /
 And You turned the pure hand white [with *tzara‘at*]
And You turned the Sea of Reeds into dry land /
 And the sea bed into dry, hard earth.
You who turned the rock into a pool of water / the flinty rock into a fountain, /
 if only you would turn me from male to female!
Were I to have the privilege, how you would [thus] favor me with kindness /
 I would be the lady of the house and I would decamp from army to home.
And what shall I speak and what shall I say? /
 Why would I cry and why would I be embittered?
If my heavenly father thus decreed for me /
 And placed in me a permanent blemish that cannot be removed from me.
And worrying about what is impossible is mortal pain and misery /
 And vapid words of consolation are of no use,
I said: I shall bear it and I shall suffer it /
 Until I die and wither.
And later I learned from tradition /
 That one offers a blessing over both good and bad.
I will offer a blessing in an undertone and in a weak voice: /
 Blessed are You, O LORD, who has not made me a woman.⁴

It should be noted that while the poet directs his request to his Creator and not to a surgeon who operates on human beings, any speaker of Hebrew can understand every word.

⁴ Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 168. (Originally published in English; Hebrew title - *Gazelle Hunting*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2006). The present translation does not preserve the AA / BB / CC rhyme scheme.

I have chosen to summarize the unique characteristics of Hebrew, in its various historical incarnations, following the pattern of Shlomo Alkabetz's liturgical poem *Lekha Dodi*. The kabbalists of Safed customarily received the arriving Shabbat Queen by recalling the six days of labor while concentrating on the seventh day, which sanctifies her (as one does a bride) in the palace of time. Not without reason did Heschel point out that the word "Shabbat" was the only word in the Ten Commandments that could not be translated into Greek in the Septuagint.⁵ Perhaps this is because it expresses the holiness of time (and not of place), an idea that constitutes a uniquely Jewish contribution to human civilization.

Day 1:

Hebrew - the language in which the Tanakh ("the Hebrew Bible") was composed - even now a fruitful and fructifying Western cultural canon, on which various Western cultures have drawn. The foundation for both *halakhah* (law) and *aggadah* (lore), a book of many books, the Book of Books, it continues to generate drama, literature, poetry, film, and works in the plastic arts. The Hebrew Bible gave the world not only stories, but words and expressions as well. So, for example, the whole world says "Amen" in Hebrew and sings songs of praise with the Hebrew "Hallelujah." The Latin script that is so widely disseminated is called the *alphabet*, and "formless and void" (*tohu va-vohu*, from Gen. 1:2) is an accepted expression for primal chaos.

Day 2:

Hebrew - a language that has gone from being a holy tongue to being an everyday medium, alive and kicking, a language used not only in public settings but intimate ones as well. And today there are not only Hebrew robbers, as Ben Gurion wished for the State of Israel, but also a Hebrew proprietress of a house of ill repute, a *k'lonit* - that is, a madam. Shulamit Har-Even says that the transition from using the term *k'lonit* (derived from *kalon*, disgrace) to adopting the term "madam" is testimony to what has happened to our society. And we have pimps, too, known as

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

sarsurim. In Rabbinic Hebrew, a *sarsur* was simply a middleman, a dealer, especially a land dealer; In Contemporary Hebrew it refers to someone who traffics in women.

Day 3:

Hebrew - a language that has preserved its alphabet as a homeland. Just try writing it in Latin characters or another foreign alphabet!

Jewish languages have employed the Hebrew alphabet and a vocabulary drawn from Hebrew in order to preserve our culture and tradition held aloft on the wings of the Hebrew language, taking flight among the languages of the place where they lived.

Let us mention why Ben-Yehuda's son Itamar Ben-Avi, in his book *L'enclave*⁶ ("The Enclave"), advocated the use of the Latin alphabet for writing both Hebrew and Arabic. He believed that removing the obstacle of the written languages' foreignness (from a European point of view) would help establish a bridge of good neighborliness and bring about cultural renewal in the Middle East.

Day 4:

Hebrew - a language that has enabled individuals, women no less than men, to catalyze historical processes.⁷

Two years before the idea of a Hebrew university was broached, the linguist and historian Theodore Noeldeke wrote in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* entry on "Semitic languages" on the 'dead language known as Hebrew', "The dream of some Zionists, that Hebrew - a would-be Hebrew, that is to say - will again become a living, popular language in Palestine, has still less prospect of realization than their vision of a restored Jewish empire in the Holy Land."

On the place of women and men and in this amazing adventure much has yet to be said, but it did not emerge out of nothing. Let us not forget that Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's foundational article "A Weighty Question" was rejected at first by David Gordon, the editor of *Ha-Maggid* and accepted later on by Peretz Smolenskin, the

⁶ Originally published in French, 1931 and never translated into Hebrew.

⁷ Binyamin Harshav, *Language in a Time of Revolution* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

editor of *Ha-Shahar* - i.e., there was a public large enough not only to read it in Hebrew but also to dispute its content in Hebrew!

Day 5:

Hebrew - a language whose literate, text-based culture as well as its history have induced it to create a connecting, linking transition, not one of rejection and erasure, so that those who speak it today are able to comprehend ancient texts. Let's compare the fate and historical transformations of Hebrew with those of Latin and French, or those of English. A Hebrew-speaking child is able to read a "Love Song to Jerusalem" composed in alphabetical acrostic, found in the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran - a text more than 2,000 years old. A French university student is unable to read "*La Chanson de Roland*" dated to be from the 11th century. A student studying English literature at a university is unable to read Chaucer's "*Canterbury Tales*", from the beginning of the 15th century.

Day 6:

Hebrew - a language portrayed by some as sacred and beyond our ken, though in fact it winks at the world, embraces those languages that approach it, and happily naturalizes resident aliens. Sometimes its speakers, both the educated and the ignorant and *buryanim*⁸, fail entirely to recognize the source from which words in common daily use have sprung.

So, for example, Persian loan words that entered the Biblical corpus are accepted by us today as Hebrew words. The word for "time," זמן (*zeman*), whose sanctity is a central principle in our heritage, is borrowed from a Persian root the meaning of which is "go," and which, by the way, was taken into Arabic as well. Or the term for "religion," דת (*dat*), which appears in the Book of Esther in the sense of "law" or "custom," has its origin in a Persian word meaning "given (data)." The word for "orchard," פרדס (*pardes*), which we note with pride brought the Garden of Eden to European languages in the form of the word "paradise," is the Persian word for "garden," and it too made its way into Arabic as well. The word בוסתן (*bustan*), which

⁸ *Buryanim* - a new term that I coined in order to describe those who use or misuse oral expressions without recognizing their origin.

speakers or Hebrew and Arabic know as a term for a garden, combines two components from Persian: *bu*, which means a pleasant scent, and the suffix *stan*, which designates a region, an area.

Many words of the sort we encounter in the work of renowned poets such as Nathan Alterman, words for clock (אוֹרְלוֹגִין, *orlogin*), hostel (אַחְסַנְיָה, *akhsanya*), and inn (פּוֹדָק, *pundak*), are Greek in origin, as are the words פָּז (*paz* – gold), לְפַיִס (*l'fayyes* – to appease, make peace with), פְּרָס (*p^eras* – a reward), נָמֵל (*namel* – port), and תִּיק (*tik* – satchel or file). Purists who wish to speak a 'true and authentic' Hebrew prefer to call a portrait דְּיוֹקָן (*d^eyokan*) rather than the obviously borrowed פּוֹרְטֵרֵט (*portret*), and yet the former is a Greek loan word, as are דְּפּוּס (*d^efus* – printing) and even סְנֵהֲדָרִין (*sanhedrin* – Sanhedrin, the supreme rabbinic court). Two words carried aloft on the wings of poetry הַמְנוֹן - (*hymnon*), a word called up for active duty in service to our country and beyond as the term for “anthem,” and פִּיּוּט (*piyyut* – liturgical poem,) to whose melodies we owe a significant component of the continuity of Hebrew over the ages - are both of Greek origin.

Many times I hear Hebrew speakers telling someone who uses the word אַרְכִּיטֵקְט (*arkhitekt* – architect) to use the 'Hebrew term' for it instead: אֲדָרִיחַל (*adrikhal*). The latter, though, is one of the many Akkadian terms we think of as 'pure,' 'authentic' Hebrew, as are סָרִיס (*saris* – eunuch) and תַּרְנֹגוֹל (*tarn^egol* – rooster).

And so we come to Shabbat, equipped with plenty to think about regarding our own Hebrew.

Shabbat:

Hebrew is a language hungry for life, a language that was our spiritual homeland - orally and in writing, sometimes more written than oral. Hebrew is a language that enabled us to be open to the world while maintaining our uniqueness and distinguishing between particularity and separatism.

If we take Hebrew into Ahad Ha'am's famous formulation about Shabbat, we can say, “More than Hebrew speakers have maintained their language, Hebrew has maintained them....” If we prefer to be more strict on ourselves, we may cite Bialik, the great poet and anthologizer who revealed and concealed the legends that the Sages

bequeathed to us: "I believe in a nation that has but one spinal cord: the Hebrew language!"⁹ And if we choose to summarize the point in the words of a contemporary scholar, we can cite Prof. Aharon Dotan: "Language is a living, developing creature, and like every living creature it has a life of its own.... Language is the basis of our culture, and understanding its sources and its paths is a route to understanding ourselves."¹⁰ And with all the modesty at this time and place (and in full awareness of Who is known in Hebrew as *Ha-makom*, "the place"), I would like to add, in my own words, that Hebrew belongs to everyone who speaks it and chooses it. The key is to be a choosing people, not a chosen people.

I feel doubly fortunate, here beside those close to me - my husband and my children, my brother and my friends; not just because I am honored with this degree alongside that Sweet Singer of Israel, Prof. Eli Schleifer, of whom it is said, "Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing hymns to His name, for it is pleasant" (Ps. 135:3), and we may add, "By day may the LORD vouchsafe His sacred care, so that at night a song to Him may be with me, a prayer to the God of my life" (Ps. 42:9). I feel honored because alongside me as well is that dedicated social activist, Dr. Javier Simonovich, whose work recalls the prophet's statement, "But only in this should one glory: In his earnest devotion to Me. For I the LORD act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world; for in these I delight - declares the LORD" (Jer. 9:23), and as we are taught in Pirkei Avot, "Not study but deed is the essence [of virtue]" (Avot 1:17). Not because of that, because, in my view, there is special significance to the fact that the institution that has granted us and others this degree is a place that superbly links together the maintenance of tradition with respect for universal values. A place that recognizes that faith, too, has its own life, and it continually makes progress and renews itself. In this place a visitor can choose, as I do, to read the liturgy in Hebrew, or to pray in his own language or any of the world's languages, to accompany his prayer with social action, to pursue peace, and to believe and hope that our words and our deeds be deemed acceptable and desirable on earth and in Heaven.

Translated by Peretz A. Rodman.

⁹. Chaim Nahman Bialik, *Devarim She-b'e'al Peh*, II (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1935), 157.

¹⁰. Aharon Dotan, speech upon receiving the Israel Prize, 2005.

