

Shaul Magid



REVIEW

Liora R. Halperin, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 313 + xiv pp. Index.

In 1926, scholar of Kabbalah and ardent Zionist Gershom Scholem wrote a letter from Mandate Palestine to German-Jewish philosopher and anti-Zionist, Franz Rosenzweig. The letter began as follows: “This country is a volcano! It harbors the language! One speaks here of many matters that may make us fail. More than anything else we are concerned today about the Arab. But much more sinister than the Arab problem is another threat, a threat which the Zionist enterprise unavoidably has had to face: the ‘actualization’ of Hebrew.” He continues, “*Fraught with danger is the Hebrew language!*! . . . Since our children have no other language, they and they alone will have to pay for this predicament, which none other than we imposed upon them without forethought and without question.” The question of Hebrew as the language of Zionism, and the notion of creating a monolingual Zionist society in Palestine, stands as a cornerstone of the Zionist revolution. Recently Eyal Chowers in his *The Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land* put it quite succinctly, “Zionism meant more than political independence in Palestine. It promised both material and spiritual transformation . . . and the revival of the Hebrew language, which would launch a secular, fresh cultural experiment and introduce new substance into the Jewish collective identity. Some even hoped for a new Jew: natural, assertive, self-reliant, productive, and so on.” (p. 7). The revival of Hebrew was a source of pride for many secular European Jews who had abandoned *lashon ha-kodesh* (the holy tongue) and felt that an authentic modern Jewish culture required a new language that represented a new spirit. It had to be simultaneously authentic and revolutionary. The mix of ancient and new was both toxic, and ecstatic, hence Scholem’s description of the country as a “volcano.” What did it mean to build a country in a language that almost no one spoke, a language that would replace even the Jewish languages spoken for centuries. It was audacious. And it was largely successful, albeit not without a fight.

But all successes have their price. Scholem's fear of the transition of Hebrew from *lashon ha-kodesh* (the holy tongue) to the secular language of the marketplace, and Chower's correct assessment that we cannot understand Zionism without the centrality of Hebrew as the conduit toward a secular revolution, assess that price. More significant than Scholem's passing remarks to Rosenzweig is Liora Halperin's *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948*, a fascinating historical study of the role of Hebrew and language diversity in the period immediately preceding the founding of the Israeli state. *Babel in Zion* is, as far as I know, the first book-length study that views the development of Zionism and nationalism exclusively through the lens of language diversity and the debates about Hebrew mono-lingualism among Jews in Mandate Palestine. With painstaking use of archival data and careful historical analysis, Halperin builds her argument to show the complexity of Hebrew as a way of showing the fissures in the Zionist project more generally. In today's times, when it appears impossible to write about Zionism or Israel without being accused of a pro- or anti-Israel "agenda," this careful study, which concludes with the establishment of the state, succeeds in showing us the complexity of a people charged with founding both a nation-state and a culture in very short order, and with looming destruction on the horizon. Given that mandate it could only be chaotic. And it was. Late in the book Halperin reflects, "This book has contended, first, that the Yishuv's diverse language encounters required a complex set of accommodations and negotiations and, second, that these encounters could be symbolically important even for those without knowledge of the languages in question." (p. 145). In short, the debate about language diversity is not solely, or even primarily, about who speaks what, where. It is, rather, about the very nature of cultural capital and power, who has it, and who has the right to use it. Moreover, it shows the extent to which the romantic Zionism many in our generation were fed in literature or on the silver screen was a far messier and rebellious story as the ideological culture wars of the elite clashed with the very pragmatic cultural and economic concerns of the populace, the "new Jew" Zionism was trying mightily to cultivate.

The relationship with language and languages was endemic to the experience of Jewish immigration to Palestine. Engrossed in reading *Babel in Zion*, I jotted down my own reflections somewhere in the margins: "Palestine was the nexus of four language clusters: the language of the home (German, Polish, Yiddish, etc.), the language of power (English), the language of the land (Arabic), and the language of ideology (Hebrew)." These four language clusters bounce off one another in interesting ways during the mandate period when Jews

were simultaneously trying to build a country, create a culture, and figure out who they wanted to be in the world. Halperin quotes Menachem Brinker of the Central Council for the Enforcement of Hebrew who wrote in the 1940s, “We have an upside down world in every land of immigration the immigrant tries to speak the language of the resident but among us the opposite is true: the resident learns the language of the immigrant and imposes it on himself.” (Halperin, p. 49). Brinker was speaking about the ubiquity of German in Palestine but this also points to the complex way Jews treated Arabic, the *lingua franca* until the establishment of the state.

Halperin’s book treats three independent but linked phenomena: first, the ways in which Jewish immigrants to Palestine negotiated the continued use of the languages they spoke before they arrived; second, the role of English as the language of the mandate that also began to represent the “international” language Jewish Palestinians needed to engage with the wider world; and finally, the attitude toward Arabic among European Jewish immigrants. A smaller issue not treated extensively in *Babel in Zion* is the role of Yiddish, the language of Eastern European immigrants, in a Zionist society that in many ways was rejecting the exilic character of the Diaspora that, rightly or wrongly, Yiddish represented.

These three issues all revolved around a set of broader concerns including the way the nascent Zionist society being built in Palestine wanted to situate itself in the world. Did it view itself as European or Middle Eastern? Did it want to be a part of the region or part of the “continent”? There were also the Hebrew monolingualists, mostly in the minority but who had considerable influence, who wanted neither. They wanted a purely Hebrew society that distinguished itself from both Europe and the Middle East. Here Halperin writes, “The norm of monolingualism not only protested the importation of a European Babel but also resisted full integration with the Middle Eastern linguistic context, a context that in any case did not welcome Hebrew’s linguistic intrusion any more than it welcomed Zionist settlement – few Arabs took it upon themselves to learn Hebrew.” (p. 180). This last point makes sense because in the period of Halperin’s study Arabs were the majority. Today, of course, most Israeli Arabs (who now increasingly call themselves Israeli Palestinians) and Palestinians (in the West Bank, at least) do learn some Hebrew and there is a small but growing number of Arabs who write in Hebrew. At the same time, monolingual Hebraism is on the decline among Israelis more generally. Fluency in Arabic among Israelis has always been low, except in the military and intelligence, and culturally Arabic is not a growing part of Jewish Israeli society and culture. But the marginalization of Arabic was not without its serious detractors. In a 1946 article,

Hebrew University scholar of Arabic and medieval Jewish society Shlomo Dov Goitein wrote, “Arabic study is *part of Zionism*, a part of the return to the Hebrew language and the Semitic Orient, which today is wholly Arabic speaking. We wish that our children, when they go out into the world, be able to feel themselves to *be at home in the east and to be able to act within it*, just as we desire that they do not lose the precious inheritance of European spirituality that we brought.” [italics in text] (Halperin, p. 206). Goitein’s pro-Arabism was not merely academic. He believed that if Jews could master and converse in the language of the region they would feel more at home there and become what Halperin calls a “hybrid, manifesting the best of Europe and Asia.” (p. 207). This, of course, would contest the ethno-nationalism proposed by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), the father of modern nationalism, but in retrospect it may not have been a bad idea. Just as Israel is situated geographically between Africa, Asia, and Europe, Goitein believed it should situate itself there culturally as well. Sadly, both of Goitein’s hopes seem unfulfilled; Israelis have not become an integral part of the region (linguistically, culturally, economically, or politically), nor have they, by and large, retained the “precious inheritance of European spirituality.” It may be the case that given globalization the very concept of regional co-existence is not what it once was, but it still retains some important elements. While there are many reasons for both failures, many that have nothing to do with Israel *per se*, they are significant, I think, in order to understand how in this period of transition and growth language played such a crucial part of the cultural debate.

Halperin argues persuasively that by viewing the cultural debates of this nascent society through its struggle in coming to terms with language, we get a picture of an innate double-mindedness that sometimes borders on collective confusion. She begins her conclusion by citing journalist Avraham Sharon writing in 1949. Jews, he explained, “wanted to dance at two weddings; the Israeli one and the exilic one. They had the homeland on their tongues and exile in their hearts and minds.” (p. 222). Even the Hebraists, Sharon suggests, could not let go of the diaspora. There are numerous reasons for this. First, after the Second Aliyah (ending in 1914), many immigrants did not come to Palestine primarily out of a deep Zionist conviction as much as the need for refuge in a world that was becoming increasingly untenable. Hence their cultural ties often remained tethered to their country of origin, including language, literature, media, and entertainment. This includes Europe, the Levant, and the Maghreb. Halperin’s first chapter on the home, coffeehouse, and cinema is a great window into the linguistic battles and negotiations that took place during this period, e.g. whether to show German and English films, read English books,

etc. She cites the journalist P. Azai (Pinhas Eldad) in a 1944 article. “The yearning for the English book held in the hand, with the large title facing outwards so that people will see it, is not different from the yearning for a pipe or flinging back the collar of the shirt.” Halperin comments, “The power of the English book was not only in its contents, banal or subversive as they were, but also in the semiotic power of the English language as symbol.” (p. 141). In 1944 English was still the language of power (it embodied a different kind of power after World War II) and the desire to mimic that power is a classic instance of post-colonialism: hate the ruler, mimic the ruler.

The resistance to monolingual Hebraism can be seen in a much starker way in the immigration from the crumbling Soviet Union in the 1980s, sometimes called the first “non-Zionism Aliyah.” By the mid to late 1980s the influence of the monolingualist camp had largely disintegrated due in part to the internationalization of English, cable television (to be followed in the next decade by the internet), and the growing globalization of Israeli society. Russians, few of whom at the time of the mass immigration were Zionists (most of the Refusnik Zionists immigrated earlier), felt little compulsion to Hebraize, and little pressure to do so, and so Israel witnessed, and reluctantly enabled, a plethora of Russian newspapers, magazines, and television shows. Many Russians were happy to be in Israel (although many would have preferred Europe or the U.S.) but they wanted to be there on their own terms. And Israel largely acquiesced thinking, correctly, that the next generation of Russian immigrants would Hebraize naturally.

Moving back to the mandate period, the pressure of the mandate and the predominance of English drew many Jewish Palestinians to increasingly learn and use English despite the fact that they hated the British. Many believed that if the project of statehood should not work, or even if it did, if Europe became a safer place for Jews, English would be the best language to know in order to return to Europe or the U.S. Many Jewish mothers were Zionists in their hearts but also wanted to maximize options for their children, so they made sure they learned another language. This has turned out to be true in today’s era of globalization in ways these Jewish mothers could never have dreamed of.

In some way monolingual Hebraism is a thing of the past. Israeli academics regularly publish in English, and sometimes French, and are actually encouraged to do so! It is only in the hyper-nationalist religious Zionist camp where English is shunned (even as many learn it privately). To be a monolingual Hebrew speaker today is, in one sense, to choose to be disabled, to opt for self-exile from the world. Like many small countries, bilingualism in Israel is a necessary ticket

to cultural and economic success. The extent to which that has had an impact on Zionism more generally is an important question. If Hebraism was a cornerstone of Zionism, how can it survive in a functionally multilingual country?

The issue in *Babel in Zion* that remains highly relevant today is the chapter entitled, “Zion in Babel: The Yishuv in its Arabic-Speaking Context.” Here Halperin delves deeply into the Jewish Palestinian relationship to Arabic and Arab culture in ways that resonate as we watch the ever-unfolding tragedy called “the Israel/Palestine conflict.” It is thus worth addressing some of her major conclusions. It is a sad fact, Halperin notes, that new immigrants to Palestine generally did not feel any compulsion to learn Arabic, the language of the large majority in their new home. The reasons were in one sense obvious. The Zionists were intent from the beginning in setting up a new country, a country that would not include Arabic in any integral way. The so-called “Arab Question” was not central to most new immigrants, only to a select group of leftist intellectuals. Most believed the Arabs would simply pack up and leave on their own. There were some important exceptions to this rule in addition to scholars such as Goitein mentioned above. The leftist Shomer ha-Tza’ir kibbutz movement was very active in promoting Arabic language study for its members and believed that a shared language with its Arab neighbors would make the transition to a Zionist country easier and more peaceful. In the mandate period, at least, they largely wanted Israel to include an Arab population that would feel comfortable in its new country. Less wholesome but still important were the several Zionist Arabic language newspapers whose intent was to explain Zionist ideology to an Arab audience, perhaps the first real instance of what much later would become known as *hasbara*. There were others who simply believed that knowledge of Arabic would help to promote co-existence with Israel’s neighbors. Halperin cites a 1946 article in the Hebrew language paper *Ha-Boker* that states unequivocally, “. . . knowledge of the language of our neighbors is a fundamental obligation and shared lives will not be possible in this land and in the vicinity without a common language.” This largely fell on deaf ears. It is perhaps significant that while every prime minister of Israel has had some facility with English (and other European languages, Ehud Olmert also knowing some Mandarin), not one to my knowledge has had the capacity to converse in Arabic. Apparently David Ben Gurion, who knew many languages, tried to learn Arabic in 1909 and soon gave up. Here the Mizrahi community played a crucial role as many of them knew Arabic quite well and contributed to the study of Arabic among Jewish immigrants to Palestine. Halperin shows that there were some real moments of Jewish–Arab collaboration during the mandate period as a

result of some Jews attaining fluency in Arabic, but it was mostly relegated to *hasbara* or simple communication with Arab workers, the way many upper-income whites in LA know Spanish. After the founding of the State of Israel, with the Jews retaining most of the power and the solidification of a Jewish majority, Arabic became less important. As Halperin notes, more often than not the common language between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians today is English. Of course, one could never know what might have transpired had Jewish Palestinians taken the language of the land they now inhabited more seriously. But ideology won the day and thus that is a story that will never be told.

Babel in Zion is a book of history but it is also more than that. It opens its reader to a fascinating moment in time when the Jewish world was in flux, when ideology reigned supreme, when the future seemed bleak and bright at the same time. The Jews were returning to their ancestral homeland as they were being decimated in the counties where they had lived for more than a millennium. The new met the old in a crash whose volume was almost biblical. In the very thick of it stood Hebrew, modern Hebrew, a new language, and around it the chattering of multiple languages of the Jews, languages that had served the Jews for over a thousand years. Included was the ironic twist that the ancient holy language of the study house was now the language to buy tomatoes. How could they all live together? Could they co-exist? Putting aside the Israeli propaganda films that paint a picture of a society making the desert bloom, it was a messy story fraught with divided passions. Halperin's *Babel in Zion* offers us an intimate, meticulously researched, and well-written window into that chaos. Scholem was right even more than he knew when he wrote in 1926, "This country is a volcano! It harbors the language!"

INDIANA UNIVERSITY/BLOOMINGTON

doi:10.1093/mj/kju022