

Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies

THE GREAT TRANSITION

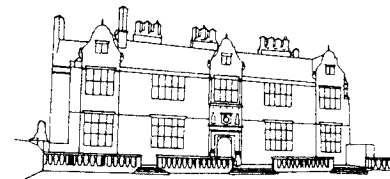
The Recovery of the Lost Centers of
Modern Hebrew Literature

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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The Rise of the Literary Center in Palestine

ZOHAR SHAVIT

Hebrew literary centers in Europe began to decline towards the end of the nineteenth century except for a short period between 1880 and 1890, during which they flourished. After that, it should be said, they never managed to recover, in spite of extensive efforts and huge investments to reestablish centers in various areas of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, with fewer resources involved, an alternative center arose in Palestine the development of which was long, complex and painful.

Before dealing with the issue of the decline and rise of the Hebrew literary centers, one's understanding of the term "literary center" should be clarified. "Literary center" here refers to an area in which an established group of writers consistently, over a period of time, produce literary texts through established literary institutions (such as periodicals and publishing houses) and address those texts to potential or real groups of readers who, in one way or another, support the literary establishment, either commercially or ideologically. Hence, this notion involves more than merely a group of writers, whatever the value of their writing, but assumes also the existence of a potential or actual readership and of literary institutions.

With this notion as a point of departure and with the assumption that it is the structure of literary institutions that determines their ability to function, we shall briefly examine the role that the nature of the literary institutions played in the decline of the Hebrew literary centers in Europe on the one hand, and on the other the attempt (successful in the

historical perspective) to build a center in Palestine, which until then was devoid of any basis from which the necessary institutions could develop for such a center.

Two questions will have to be asked here:

1. What happened to the Hebrew cultural life in Europe which had appeared to be so promising in 1880, yet looked so hopeless by the beginning of the twentieth century?

2. What were the reasons for the transfer of the literary centers from Europe to Palestine, a transfer which had already begun in 1910, when all the conditions (by any objective criteria) were against such a transfer (the economic situation and the lack of any Jewish intellectual base)?

Before answering these questions, the widespread view that it was the Holocaust that destroyed the Hebrew centers in Europe should be rejected. The Holocaust might have swept away the remainders of the declining centers, but by the 1930s the only Hebrew cultural center in existence was in Palestine. True, it was still supported by Jews in Europe and America and its economic basis was as it had always been; but nevertheless it was regarded not only as the hegemonic center but as the *only* Hebrew cultural center in the world.

The reasons for this were of course complicated and involved with various factors, but primarily there were two reasons: (1) the different legitimations and motivations for the existence of a Hebrew center in Palestine as opposed to Europe; and (2) the liability of maintaining a fully stratified cultural life for authentic readers which was "natural" only in the *yishuv*, while efforts to maintain such cultural strata in Europe turned out to be futile due to the different nature of the reading public there. The preference of a "natural" and authentic cultural life over an artificial one accounts, then, for the transfer of the cultural center to Palestine, in spite of the economic, social and intellectual obstacles, and in spite of the fact that the men of letters in Europe refused to accept the decline of the Hebrew centers and preferred to stick to their image of these centers as flourishing and possessing high potential.

The image of the flourishing European centers was the result of the status of these centers between 1880 and 1890. The Hebrew centers in Europe did experience ten years of flourishing development. During those years, literary life was more active than at any other time in the history of modern Hebrew literature. New periodicals and newspapers appeared: *haasif*, *hashiloah*, *luah ahiasaf*, *hayom*, *hatzefira*, and *hamelitz*, among others. Hundreds of new books were published by new publishing houses

(Ahiasaf, Sifrei Agora, Tushia and Moria). The number of readers grew tremendously (10,000 copies of *haasif* were sold in 1884). Writers were paid royalties for the first time in the history of modern Hebrew literature.

But the image was misleading and actually had no real basis, because the increasing literary activity had neither a real claim nor any readership upon which to depend. In Brenner's words: "The boughs of the trees increased sometimes, but the roots were becoming fewer and fewer." What happened to the roots? Hebrew literature was losing its roots. Its main problem was the lack of strongly motivated readers who would respond to the efforts to supply their cultural needs in Hebrew, because these could be supplied to them by European or even Yiddish literature. The readership, which had always been small (except during a very short period), began to shrink during the period of intense activity at the end of the century, as is indicated by the poor status of periodicals. The most prestigious periodical, *hashiloah*, closed for two years due to a decrease in the number of its subscribers to 700. *hador* was closed in 1902 because it could not attract the necessary 1,000 subscribers, and the attempt to reestablish it in 1904 resulted in financial catastrophe.

This, however, was not the case in Palestine, for in Palestine there developed a public for whom the Hebrew language was, at first for ideological reasons and later in practice, both the everyday and the cultural language. This public, which had a high regard for culture on the whole and for literature in particular, supplied the opportunity for the first time to build an authentic cultural life.

This result, however, was not reached immediately—quite the contrary. Attempts were made to rebuild Hebrew centers in Moscow (*dvir* and *stiebel*); Germany (*dvir*, *amanut*, Schocken); London (*hame'orer*, *iyim*) and in America (*miklat*, *hador*, *bitzaron*); but they were all doomed to failure. Once the failure became obvious, it was realized that Palestine could offer something that did not exist anywhere else. Some writers, such as Brenner and Redler, realized this as early as 1909, and others, such as Bialik, as late as the middle of the 1920s. Many people involved in literary activity began to emigrate to Palestine. So many went that at an anti-zionist meeting, which took place in February 1924, Dr. Coresh Adler claimed that too many writers, teachers and intellectuals were going to Palestine and would be a real burden on the community. There they took part in the establishment of periodicals, publishing houses, trade unions, and so on. Moreover, in Palestine they created not merely a center of literature, as was the case in Europe, but a fully stratified cultural life, which was composed of specialist and popular literature, music, painting and theater. Such a cultural life was possible not only be-

cause culture on the whole and literature in particular enjoyed a high status—both in Europe and in Palestine—but also because it was based on a new and stable reading public, small in absolute numbers (the number of copies of each book bought in Palestine hardly exceeded 1,000 during the first decade, 3,000 copies during the twenties), but huge in proportion to the population. The writers and their public not only regarded Palestine as the Massada of Hebrew culture but, unlike their counterparts in Europe, believed widespread cultural life to be a necessary precondition for the establishment of the Jewish community in Palestine. Moreover, culture was regarded as an indication of the existence of such a community. Because of this they were ready to take part in many enterprises, even at the cost of personal sacrifice, in order to have the fullest possible cultural life. It should be admitted that many of their activities and plans were never realized and many failed. Yet, as figures show, by 1926, 23 publishing houses were reported to exist in Palestine. In 1928, 321 books were published in Palestine, while only nine Hebrew books were published in Poland and six in Germany. In addition, the readers were willing to support this enterprise: 12,000 books were sold that year each month to a population of 160,000.

True, the economic basis was shaky and the center in Palestine needed the support of the Jews in Europe and America. Periodicals like *ketuvim* were sold in equal numbers in Europe, America and Palestine (1,500 copies); but over 2,000 copies of the newspaper *davar* were sold in Palestine, while only 684 copies were sold abroad in 1928. However, this support decreased towards the 1930s. (During 1926, for instance, over 1,000 copies of Bialik's book were sold in Palestine—while only 170 copies were sold in all of Europe and America.) These facts indicate the hegemonic status of the Palestine center, which was supplying books to Europe and America, in contrast to its dependent position at the beginning of the twentieth century. Relations between the centers in Palestine and other centers had changed. In Palestine, men of letters no longer needed to appeal to writers in Europe and pray for literary material. They could now supply all their own cultural needs, as well as those of Jews living abroad.

The process of this transfer of the cultural center to Palestine started at the outset of the twentieth century, and was completed in the 1930s. During this process a small and deprived Jewish community managed to build and support in Palestine a fully stratified cultural life which had practically no commercial basis, but nevertheless had a very strong ideological claim and motivation which made its existence possible.