Yes to a Culture

By Ari Katzman

I

n January 1930, David Ben-Gurion, who was then the leader of the Histadrut labor federation, set out to find out all he could about every worker in the Yishuv—the pre-State Jewish community in Palestine. This initiated a flight of investigations into the living conditions of the Jewish workers. The result was a series of reports that were to have a profound influence on the development of the State of Israel. The reports revealed the dire straits in which the workers lived, and the measures that were necessary to improve their living conditions. The reports showed that the workers were living in poverty, and that the conditions under which they worked were not only inhumane, but also illegal. The reports also revealed the extent of the corruption and waste that was taking place in the Yishuv, and the extent of the power that was being wielded by the Jewish leaders.

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The reports were a catalyst for the establishment of the Jewish National Fund, which was established in 1930. The fund was established to invest in the development of the land of Israel, and to ensure that the land would be used for the benefit of the Jewish people. The fund was a testament to the commitment of the Jewish people to the development of the State of Israel, and it was a reminder that the Jewish people were not just a group of individuals, but a collective entity that had a responsibility to ensure the well-being of all its members.

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"We are losing our language. Many political, academic and educational leaders do not know Hebrew. The language is becoming impoverished."

decision: 'if you are a Hebrew, speak Hebrew!' Obviously that group — I am talking about the second and third waves of immigration (1904-14, 1919-23) — barely needed coercing. But coercion was needed in the fourth and fifth waves (1924-28, 1929-39). It had to be clear that there was a price for joining the project.

Initially it was sufficient to exercise 'moderate coercion.' But as time passed and the number of participants in the project increased, coercion had to be stepped up. The process is encapsulated in the story of the library at Kibbutz Beit Hashita; Shavit notes. 'The library of German books was shut down in order to force the members to read Hebrew. It is a tragedy, but there is no other way to do it. The 'real problem' was created when the veteran group, which had forged a new code, tried to force it on the masses of new immigrants who arrived after the state was established and who were much less of a partner in the building process. Once the state came into being, the leadership should have switched gears. This is where their failure lies — in not succeeded in persuading the newcomers of the project's necessity.'

After 1948, Shavit explains, the leadership's 'trappings of power were different from what they had been in the Yishuv period. The leadership was sovereign and had at its disposal a large number of institutions, through which it could plan and disseminate culture. The way to go about it was by setting norms through education, information campaigns and the intensive participation of the population. But instead of taking that road they stuck to the old methods and the result was a disaster. All the puffed-up feelings — the bitterness and anger, the sense of depravation, nostalgia for symbolic ethnicity — it all stems from the poor judgment shown by the leadership in not mobilizing people for the cultural enterprise.'

The current thrust is "symbolic ethnicity," in which various groups aim "to exchange Hebraism for ostensibly ethnic symbols of their group," is the direct result of "the failure of the elite to bestow identity on those groups as part of the Hebraicizing project."

Would Shavit then do away, for example, with the Mimouna — the holiday celebrated by the Moroccan community on the day after Passover, which in recent years has become a mass public event? "I don't want to cancel the Mimouna," she says. "In the vision of culture where Hebrew is hegemonic, it is obvious that the existence of ethnic groups does not interfere with that hegemony. I am not against pluralism — I am against atomisation into sectors. In pluralism there is no competing hegemonies — there is one hegemony."

Culture, Shavit notes, "must always be planned by someone and then implemented by someone, and that someone is always an elitist, who has the power to implement and to coerce. If the planners of culture desert from their work, others will take over in their place; there is never a vacuum." Coercion, she observes, "contains a normative aspect and an aspect of law or strength. Today we need legislation simply to return to the norms that enable a national community to exist. If we don't try to relegate the source cultures to the margins, we will experience cultural disintegration."

Shavit finds nothing wrong with "legislation in the realm of culture. All the most advanced countries have cultural legislation. Why should it be acceptable in France, Canada and Belgium, but taboo here?" How is it that in Germany you can only name your children from an official book of names? And in France and Iceland? A month ago in Norway, a mother of 14 children, a pious Christian, was sent to prison because she dared to give her son a Hebrew name, 'Gershon.' The court ordered her to change the name and pay a fine, or go to jail. Out of principle she preferred jail. The child's name was not changed and the battle is continuing."

No political party, she believes, should be permitted to hold its discussions in any language but Hebrew (though Arabic, as an official language, passes muster).

An exception, Shavit conceives, can be made for immigrants from the former Soviet Union, for example, who speak Russian during recent times at school. "Children are another matter," she says, "but adds immediately, "however, the enrichment groups in Russian are a terrible thing. And I would not overdo broadcasts in foreign languages, so that people understand that in Israel, cultural life is not possible without Hebrew.

The "Hebrew essence" of the culture she is talking about, Shavit explains, is that Israel has a "holistic character. It is a culture that extends into all spheres of life, and encompasses every detail of life, large and small — body language, the minuscule qualities of the public discourse, the unwritten rules of protocol in dress and in the house and the fact that we as a community have keys to decode them that others do not. This is what enables us to identify Israelis whom we encounter abroad as Israelis even if they don't speak Hebrew, and it is what causes groups of Israelis who gather together to activate the code. We have common identity markers that run very deep, such as Israeli bluntness, the ability to say things less indirectly."

Shavit says that "this is the first time in the history of the Jews that a new, complete culture has been created, complete with rules for standing on line and behavior on the road. But another volume is needed," she says, "one that might bear the title, 'I Am Not a Sacker,' if one is correct in thinking that this statement lies at the heart of the code that is evolving these days, the code of the contemporary Israeli populist culture."

All that remains now is to prepare the grand plan for the study of Hebrew culture, Zohar Shavit already has a plan for the future.