

The Cultural Center in Palestine

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Before addressing myself to our specific subject — a discussion of one aspect of the nature and content of the Hebrew cultural center from the beginning of the twentieth century — it will be particularly useful first to define and characterize the essential difference between “a Hebrew cultural center” or more specifically, “a Hebrew literary center” in the diaspora and the “Hebrew cultural center” in Palestine.

The concept of a “literary center” is a limited one as applied to only one area of creative cultural activity. An active “literary center,” important to the history of literature, can exist anywhere that a literary group (or groups) gathers together, or any place where a productive, fruitful meeting of a group of intellectuals develops. In such cases the location of the center is generally only a geographical fact. Obviously the geographical locum of the center, its relations with the cultural milieu within which it is located and its socio-cultural backdrop are of great significance in the formation of the group. Nonetheless, the principal factor remains the nature of the literary group and the type of meetings and cooperation among its members. From this standpoint it is possible, for example, to differentiate between centers of Hebrew culture which came into being because of the emigration to a specific city and the establishment in it of a creative element and a cultural center which developed from within a local society. This is certainly one of the differences between the literary-cultural centers in Vilna, for example, and that which developed up to World War I in Odessa, and even more markedly those literary circles which settled for a time in Berlin, Berne or elsewhere. A city-based group can be the base from which a literary “school” or ideology develops, certainly. Yet a literary school is mainly ex-territorial. It is thus im-

possible to limit discussion of it exclusively to the area in which it arose or became formalized.

In this sense the European centers of Hebrew culture are a limited phenomenon: on the one hand we are interested in literary groups around which wide-ranging cultural activity can develop, while, on the other, we are interested in ideologically motivated Hebrew cultural-literary activity, which constitutes no more than a part (often only a small part) of all the cultural literary activity which is going on in other languages (Yiddish and the local language).

In Palestine, however, the creation of a cultural literary center was an integral part of the birth of a new national society. The literary center was part of that society, a vital, immanent element helping to define the general cultural and national identity of that society. The cultural aspect constitutes one facet of the process of the formation of a national society with all its institutions, organizations, values and way of life. It plays an active role in the formation of this society, being even a form of justification for its very creation, and reflects — almost exclusively — that society and its problems. Its cultural milieu is not diffuse but concentrated, both territorially and socioculturally.

As early as 1918, at the start of the British mandate over Palestine, Y. H. Brenner in an article signed “Bar-Yohai” in *haaretz veba'avodah*, a quarterly dedicated to literature and issues of labor and the *yishuv*, described one of the problems of the creation of a Hebrew cultural center in Palestine. He said that in Palestine a cultural center was developing in an atmosphere which was culturally “empty,” in an Ottoman province which had nothing to offer by way of challenge, incentive or cultural pressure; and it would thus be possible to create an autonomous and even autarchic culture within that cultural vacuum. The British presence, however, would introduce a high level of culture into Palestine, one which would be capable of exercising great pressures; and British culture would be likely to limit the free development of Hebrew culture and create a situation similar to that in the diaspora, in which Hebrew culture was placed under pressure by strong native cultures.

It follows that the uniqueness of the development of Hebrew culture and culture in Hebrew in Palestine during the Mandate period was that it developed — simultaneously with the other elements of the national society — at a fast pace, with great intensity and over a short period of time. In Palestine, Hebrew culture and Hebrew literature found their natural climate not only because *eretz yisrael* is the “Hebrew homeland,” but because only there were they an integral, immanent part of a national society — only there could they be rescued from a situation of diglossia and fill all the various roles demanded of a national culture by a

national society. For that reason the originators of the idea of "Hebrew renewal" repeatedly spoke of the need for — and the possibility of — living a "full, total Hebrew life" in *eretz yisrael* and there only. Hebrew culture and culture in Hebrew were required to function at all levels and in every area and to operate exclusively as much as possible.

From this perspective, the history of Hebrew culture in Palestine can be described as devoted to an intensive, conscious, concerted effort to extricate Hebrew culture from a situation of diglossia, and this was achieved in two ways: 1) by creating a native Hebrew culture; 2) by creating culture in Hebrew. The one factor common to the two methods was the Hebrew language, but in the first context Hebrew was required to be the language of a native culture, while within the second it was asked to fulfil an intermediary function and play a more utilitarian role, that of transmitting a foreign (generally European) culture. The issue of "Hebrew culture" or "culture in Hebrew" was the subject of a great many discussions among the ideologists of culture and those involved in culture in the Zionist movement in the Diaspora and in Palestine. In Palestine this was a question of immediate social and political concern. The decisions were no longer theoretical ones, but were important to the process of escaping diglossia and "filling" the nascent Hebrew culture with actual meaning: literature (original or translated), theater, education, and so on. It almost goes without saying that for those who preferred "culture in Hebrew" the process of "filling" was also significant with regard to value content, for here, too, decisions were demanded with regard to selection: if to translate, then what to translate? What norms were to be followed? What was proper for "Hebrew culture," and what was "foreign" to it? In this instance, too, the decision was connected with the concept which the proponent held with regard to the desired image of the Hebrew culture, and what should the social function of culture be?

From a contemporary standpoint, many of the discussions of this period are mainly of a theoretical or rhetorical nature; many involve a search for "culture salvation." This type of discussion frequently accompanies the creation of a new society and the struggles over defining its character. Not only was "Hebrew culture" in Mandatory Palestine in actuality the combined result of original creation and translation, but much of what was considered "original Hebrew culture" was no more than the borrowing and adaptation of European cultural content. Yet, the essential difference between these two approaches, "Hebrew culture" and "culture in Hebrew," is based on a different concept of the role of culture (and of literature as something which has a central role in culture) in a national society. The ideologies of secular Hebrew culture visualized

principally a culture of the elite, a canonized culture of high values. At the same time, the ideologue of culture in Hebrew thought in terms of a pluralistic, stratified culture (in a pluralistic, stratified society), which had to provide in Hebrew for society's needs in "culture" and "art" at all registers. For the former, the meaning of "full Hebrew life" was life within — and of — "original Hebrew culture," while for the latter, culture in Hebrew could be borrowed and translated — the condition being only that it be offered to the reader in Hebrew.

Obviously we are dealing here with different concepts of national culture and varying images of a "national homeland"; this is not surprising, as the proponents of the former were part of the intelligentsia connected to the *eretz yisrael* labor movement, while the latter were part of the bourgeois nationalist *eretz yisrael* intelligentsia.

In this limited context we cannot describe, categorize or analyze the various definitions which have been given to the concept of *ivriut* ("Hebrewness"), from its first appearance in the last quarter of the nineteenth century through its change from a meta-historical, theoretical concept to part of the interfacing of actual cultural determination. We shall, therefore, apply ourselves only to the problem of comparing "a Hebrew cultural center" located in any given center in the diaspora with the Hebrew cultural center in Palestine. It is my contention that the incipient formation of a literary cultural center as part of Jewish national culture in the diaspora — if it can be so described — was nothing but an illusion. Hebrew culture in the diaspora could not develop, because it had no audience and because it was not an immanent part of the creation of a national society. The centers of Hebrew culture in the diaspora were milestones in a process of important historical development, but as important as they were, in themselves, their main importance is in their being milestones in a process which culminated in the development of national Hebrew culture in *eretz yisrael*. Without this creation, the importance of these centers in the diaspora would certainly have been only marginal from a historical point of view, while the creation of Hebrew cultural centers in *eretz yisrael* itself was to a great extent utopian. The ideology of *ivriut*, of a "full Hebrew life" in *eretz yisrael* — as it was understood by people who greatly differed from one another — was part of the Zionist Utopia of the Mandate period. The middle 1920s are the years in which the shift of the Hebrew cultural centers to Palestine became clearly noticeable; they are also the years in which the "Utopia" of *ivriut* began to be worn away by various social and cultural processes. Hebrew culture was indeed culture *in* Hebrew, but the desired goal of creating an authentic Hebrew culture was not realized. Much has been written in Zionist and *eretz yisrael* historiography about "ideology and re-

ality," but not enough has been written as yet about the ideology of culture versus cultural reality as it exists. Either way it is clear that the history of Hebrew culture (literature included) in *eretz yisrael* constitutes an important part of the social and political national-territorial history, while the history of Hebrew culture in the various centers in the diaspora is mainly literary or intellectual history.

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