

Multilingual Anxiety and the Invention of the Hebrew Native: A Reading of a Hebrew Feuilleton by S. Ben Zion

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the relationship between multilingualism, the attempted revival of Hebrew speech, and the sense of muteness that accompanied Hebrew literary production in the first decade of the twentieth century. It does so through a close reading of a Hebrew feuilleton, written by Simhah Ben Zion and published in 1907 in the first issue of the Palestine-based Hebrew journal *Ha-'omer*. At the center of the feuilleton is a living wonderment: an eight-year-old girl—the narrator's daughter—who speaks no fewer than eight languages, one for each year of her life. Although the narrator and his wife, both ardent Zionists, struggle to maintain a Hebrew-speaking home, they soon learn that their sociolinguistic reality does not coincide with the monolingual fantasy of imposing Hebrew as an exclusive, isolated language. The article argues that in the midst of an endeavor to reterritorialize Hebrew creativity in Palestine and constitute the Hebrew-speaking native, Ben Zion's feuilleton satirically narrates Hebrew revival as a chaotic Babel, revealing not only the failures of this project but also its latent anxieties.

IN A HEBREW FEUILLETON PUBLISHED IN PALESTINE IN 1907, a startling linguistic horizon is portrayed in stark ironical tones. The narrator's daughter, pompously named "the daughter of Zion," speaks no fewer than eight languages, one for each year of her life.¹ Despite ongoing endeavors to create a Zionist Hebrew-speaking home, the father-narrator is amazed to discover that at the age of eight, his daughter—an epitome of the next generation of Jewish settlers in

¹ Simhah Ben Zion, "Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah" [From the flowers of revival], *Ha-'omer* 1, no. 1 (1907): 32–38.

Palestine, the hope and future of the Yishuv—has become a living Babel. Shifting from one language to the next while consistently neglecting her Hebrew, the girl embodies an uncontrollable evolution of the project of revival. By the end of the feuilleton, a perplexed, mute father faces his offspring, astounded by the multilingual reality brought about by his own pseudoheroic efforts to form a native Hebrew identity.

The feuilleton, “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah” (From the flowers of revival), was published in the first volume of *Ha’omer*, a Hebrew literary journal founded by Simhah Ben Zion (1870–1932) and edited jointly by Ben Zion and David Yellin. *Ha’omer* was first and foremost an ambitious attempt to shift the center of modern Hebrew culture from Odessa to Palestine and thereby fulfill the Ahad Ha’amic vision of a Jewish cultural center based in the land. The goal was to establish a rigorous Hebrew publication in a place where Hebrew was becoming a spoken vernacular. Against this background, Ben Zion’s feuilleton offered a satirical view of the linguistic developments of the time, questioning the dominance of Hebrew in the Jewish settlement, critiquing its educational system, and warning against a chaotic multilingual future. In the absence of a worthy feuilletonist who could contribute to the journal, Ben Zion took it upon himself to provide the collection with a Hebrew feuilleton, an addition that was meant to position *Ha’omer* as a modern and up-to-date publication.² Signed with the pseudonym *mi-bnei ha-Zamzumim*,³ the feuilleton was an opportunity for Ben Zion to speak in a different voice and exhibit some of the doubts and tensions that were stirring in the background of Hebrew revival discourse.

Ben Zion, a Hebrew and Yiddish writer, editor, and translator, was closely familiar with these tensions. Even before migrating to Palestine in 1905, he was deeply invested in the project of teaching Hebrew in Hebrew, a new pedagogical method which emphasized Hebrew communication skills as opposed to the orthodox method of teaching Hebrew in translation. In Odessa, Ben Zion taught alongside Hayim Nahman Bialik in the “progressive” heder (*ha-heder ha-metukan*), where Hebrew was the primary language of instruction. Upon arriving in Palestine, he began to teach Hebrew in the Jaffa school for girls. Throughout his life, he was involved in many educational projects, including the publication of textbooks and Hebrew readers for youth.⁴ His satirical portrayal of the marginal place of Hebrew within the Yishuv was thus affected, at least to some extent, by his own experiences as an educator.

Hebrew writing of the first decades of the twentieth century often experimented with the evolving vernacular and explored its poetic possibilities. With the increasing efforts to colloquialize the language, the attempts at spoken Hebrew were targeted as a humorous subject matter that captured some of the intricacies of the Zionist project and presented Zionism as a problem

² See Nurit Govrin, *Ha’omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito* [*Ha’omer: The birth and demise of a periodical*] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1980), 96.

³ The Hebrew word *Zamzumim* refers to a biblical people mentioned in Deut. 2:20. It is another name for *Rephaim*, an ancient people who are believed to have inhabited Canaan. The pseudonym *mi-bnei ha-Zamzumim* literally means “one of the Zamzumim.” But the onomatopoeic word also echoes the modern meaning of *zimzum*, “a buzz” or “a humming.” By calling himself “one of the Zamzumim” the author seems to suggest that what is often perceived as fluent Hebrew speech in the Jewish settlement in Palestine is in fact nothing but a meaningless buzz. Eliezer Ben Yehuda included the word *zimzum* in his dictionary as his lexical innovation; however, Ruvik Rosenthal has pointed out that the word in its modern use already appeared in the Hebrew work of S. Y. Abramovich. See Ruvik Rosenthal, “Ha-mila ha-mezamzemet” [The humming word], *Blog ha-safa ha-ivrit shel milon Rav-milim*, July 7, 2011, <https://blog.ravmilim.co.il/2011/07/07/humming/>.

⁴ Yaakov Fikhman, “S. Ben Zion,” in *Kol kitvei S. Ben Zion* [Complete works of S. Ben Zion] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1959), v–xxxii; Govrin, *Ha’omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito*, 20–26.

of language. Citing ridiculed utterances, from awkward and clunky dialogues to multilingual performances, some authors employed satire and wit to problematize the belief that Hebrew was a dominant spoken tongue within the Yishuv. In “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” Ben Zion employs the feuilleton genre, with its unique mix of playfulness and poignancy, to point to the gap between expectations and reality and express reservations about the practice of Hebrew colloquialization in Palestine.

Multilingualism plays a particularly interesting role in this evaluation of spoken Hebrew. It appears at once as a cultural potential, an existing reality, and a threat. On the one hand, the text demonstrates a lucid recognition that Hebrew necessarily shares the sociolinguistic space with other languages, whether in Europe or in the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, the reality of multilingualism, especially as it is manifested in Palestine, is entwined in Ben Zion’s humorous text with a sense of catastrophe and disaster.

Through a close reading of Ben Zion’s feuilleton “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” this article explores the relationship between multilingualism, Hebrew speech, and the sense of paralyzing crisis that governed Hebrew literary production in the first decade of the twentieth century. To a large extent, the focal point of that literary production was the invention of the Hebrew native, a figure of the future to come, whose nature and full embodiment were yet to be revealed. Early twentieth-century Hebrew literature was invested in constituting, exploring, and shaping Hebrew nativeness. Written as part of a larger attempt to both reflect the “authenticity” of that nativeness and shape it anew, Ben Zion’s text illuminates the project’s latent anxieties. The feuilleton provides a compelling view of the ways in which multilingualism was thematized and negotiated within the discourse of Hebrew revival. Drawing on the insights of current studies of multilingualism, my reading is particularly attuned to that negotiation.

MULTILINGUALISM AS A CRITICAL READING METHOD

In recent decades, scholarly focus on the question of multilingualism has served as a prism through which the field of literary studies has reevaluated some of its disciplinary assumptions. First and foremost, it has provided a path for thinking about both literature and language beyond the borders of the nation-state. It additionally has allowed for a critical reconsideration of the monolingual paradigm, along with some of its deeply ideological concepts, such as “native language” and “mother tongue.”⁵ In dialogue with these trends, Hebrew literary studies have become preoccupied with and conscious of the multilingual condition from which modern Hebrew literature has emerged.⁶ Scholars have emphasized the different ways in which this historical multi-

⁵ See, e.g., Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

⁶ See, e.g., Maya Barzilai, “Translation on the Margins: Hebrew-German-Yiddish Multilingualism in Avraham Ben Yitzhak and Yoel Hoffmann,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 7, no. 1 (February 2, 2014): 109–28; Naomi Brenner, *Lingering Bilingualism: Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures in Contact* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016); Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Adriana Jacobs, *Strange Cocktail: Translation and the Making of Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Chana Kronfeld, “The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish,” in *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Anita Norich and Joshua L. Miller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 15–35; Lital Levy and Allison Schachter, “A Non-universal Global: On Jewish Writing and World Literature,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 36, no. 1 (2017): 1–26; Na’ama Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Spaces of Zionist Literature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press,

lingualism has been a determining force in the evolution of modern Hebrew culture, and many studies that focus on linguistic diversity and the political and cultural tensions it evokes aim to challenge the teleological Zionist historiography of modern Hebrew literature, along with the monolingual-nationalist paradigm on which it is based.⁷

From a cultural history perspective, there is a growing need to explore multilingual practices as they existed in various Jewish centers. In her work on multilingualism in the Jewish settlement in Palestine, Liora Halperin has shown extensively that despite the hegemony of Hebrew in the Yishuv, its contact with various communities and entities such as the Arab world, the Jewish Diaspora, and the European powers significantly influenced and shaped its linguistic and cultural experience.⁸ The imposition of Hebrew as the sole, dominant language of that national community, Halperin argues, could never have been absolute, and a critical view of its limits provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of linguistic diversity.

Aside from excavating the linguistic diversity of early twentieth-century Palestine, or observing the different ways in which Hebrew literature has operated in an inherently multilingual terrain, the perspective of multilingualism provides Hebrew literary studies with additional tools to question and critique the integrity of Hebrew literature and challenge it as a cohesive and unified category.⁹ The opening up of modern Hebrew literary history—particularly under the circumstances of Hebrew revival discourse and the monolingual fantasy that underscores it—to multiple metanarratives that acknowledge its contact with other languages and cultures renders Hebrew literature traversable, exposed to translational influences, and fraught with a variety of linguistic traces. Such diversification of modern Hebrew literary historiography necessarily undermines the stability of the object of that historiography and redefines it by contesting its borders. That is precisely what is at stake in the effort to adopt a multilingual reading method for modern Hebrew literature. A deliberate attentiveness to the different voices and linguistic layers that surround and inhere in Hebrew texts produces a new critical understanding of these texts and transforms their cultural standing.

For this very reason, a renewed attention to texts that expose multilingual tensions and dynamics is important. As Lital Levy argues, owing to the circumstances of its formation, modern Hebrew literature is “infused with heightened awareness of its own language,” often exhibiting excessive preoccupation with its linguistic challenges and anxieties.¹⁰ This metalinguistic thematic, which Levy terms “hyperlanguage,” was a central characteristic of early

2013); Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ For instance, Chana Kronfeld (“The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish”) argues that a joint literary historiography for modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures would call into question the isolationism of the historiography of modern Hebrew literature and open the field to further consideration of Hebrew’s repressed cultural and linguistic elements and to the study of the close reciprocal contacts between Hebrew and other literatures.

⁸ Liora Halperin, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920–1948* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 1–25.

⁹ In his chapter “Literary History and Hebrew Modernity,” Gil Anidjar articulates that objective in terms of “the disappearance of the space of literature as common space, and its becoming comparative.” See his *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 82.

¹⁰ Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 11.

twentieth-century Hebrew literary production and, as we shall see, is interestingly reflected in Ben Zion's text.

What is perhaps particularly striking about Ben Zion's witty tale of a multilingual revival in the Holy Land is that its conclusion contradicts the journal's motivations and presents the attempt to promote Hebrew superiority in the Yishuv as preposterous. A central Hebrew pedagogue, Ben Zion himself devoted a major part of his career to the effort of turning Hebrew into a spoken language. Why, then, would the editor and founder of *Ha-'omer* choose to write a piece that highlights the potential failure of this project? Why would he entertain the idea that Hebrew revival might in fact bring forth something entirely different from a purified Hebrew-speaking community, cleansed of foreign infiltrations? Ben Zion's feuilleton centers on the threat of linguistic diversity while at the same time drawing attention to its presence, as the linguistic reality of the land. To better understand the tension that this recognition voices, it is important to consider *Ha-'omer's* aesthetic approach, its relation to the vernacularization of Hebrew, and the circumstances that led to its foundation.

A CULTURAL CENTER IN PALESTINE: INVENTING THE HEBREW NATIVE

In 1907, Ben Zion, who had recently immigrated to Palestine, published the first volume of the journal *Ha-'omer*, a project whose core objective was to displace the cultural focus of Hebrew literary activity from Europe to Palestine, in the spirit of Ahad Ha'am's cultural vision. The ambitious endeavor did not sustain itself for long. The journal's second and final volume was published two years later, in 1909, and the journal was shut down shortly thereafter. However, although short-lived, the journal was a compelling experiment in Hebrew publication in Palestine, capturing some of the desires that drove the Hebrew revival movement and its attempt at reterritorialization in Palestine.

The short manifesto that opened the first volume announced that "the time has come to plant our literature here, in its homeland, in a place of life. Here, in this place, where the language of the book has returned to the spoken language, the language of a generation, young and invigorated, walking toward life."¹¹ The goal, as Ben Zion presented it, was to synchronize what had been experienced in recent years as the surging forces of Hebrew creativity with the concrete efforts to shape the Jewish settlement in Palestine. For Ben Zion, this was at once a movement of transition and immersion in a new cultural space. Yet, Ben Zion maintained that the salient expression of Hebrew creativity was still largely rooted in Europe. His intention was therefore not only to publish original Hebrew works written in and about "the land of Israel" but also to include works by "the best of our writers abroad." Such a collaboration, he argued, would serve as a cornerstone in the establishment of a strong cultural foundation based in Palestine.

That contention, however, was met with a faint ridicule from a perhaps unexpected authority. In a letter to Ben Zion, Ahad Ha'am wondered, "what is the point of a collection whose participants are writers from different countries and whose focus is on matters that relate to all the countries of the Diaspora?"¹² Although Ahad Ha'am eventually participated in the journal as one of the "contributors from abroad," his initial response was skeptical. He argued that the cultural

¹¹ Simhah Ben Zion, "Tokhnit *Ha-'omer*" [*Ha-'omer's* mission], *Ha-'omer* 1, no. 1 (1907): vi. (All Hebrew quotations in this article were cotranslated into English by Sunny Yudkoff and myself.)

¹² Ahad Ha'am, quoted in Govrin, *Ha-'omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito*, 51.

atmosphere of the Yishuv was not yet ready to support such a visionary mission. Nurit Govrin, who, in a thorough study of the journal, characterized it as “a successful failure,” argues that it was doomed to fail from the outset. According to Govrin, the decision to base a “land of Israel” journal on the work of writers who were not living in the land and on the Odessian ideology of cultural Zionism was in discordance with the Yishuv’s lived experience and actual agenda.¹³

Beyond reflecting everyday life in Palestine, however, Ben Zion’s purpose was also to constitute a new cultural model, one that would differ stylistically from the widespread “Jerusalem press” associated with Eliezer Ben Yehuda, which dominated Hebrew publishing in Palestine at the time and was consensually condemned by the Yishuv’s elite for being vulgar and cumbersome. The project, as Ben Zion envisioned it, involved importing aesthetic norms and values typical of the Odessa circle into Palestine and merging them with local expression and knowledge, including various scientific studies of life in Palestine.¹⁴ The first few issues included essays by prominent European writers such as Ahad Ha’am, Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Yehoshua Hanna Ravnitzky, alongside literary works by young writers such as Yitzhak Shami and Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

The eclectic choice of works in *Ha’omer* reflected a wish to acquire knowledge about and at the same time shape and produce the figure of the Hebrew native. On the one hand, this figure was assumed to be preexisting, an object that had to be studied and explored. On the other hand, it was imagined in the form of an unfulfilled ideal. Scholars have often pointed to the ambivalence exhibited in the attempt to create cultural Hebrew nativeness, drawing attention to Zionism’s paradoxical claim to express a radical break with Judaism and at the same time to be its ultimate, authentic representation.¹⁵ In Palestine, this apparent tension was both mirrored and intensified by the dualistic relationship to “the East” and to local Arab, Bedouin, and Sephardic communities. Itamar Even-Zohar, Yael Zerubavel, and Yaron Peleg have each discussed the complex affinity that European Jewish immigrants felt toward “the East,” which they often saw both as a cultural resource linked to the Jewish past and as an inferior, primitive stage of its development, depicted through Orientalist stereotypes.¹⁶ Even-Zohar suggests that the Yishuv society felt it necessary to *invent* an alternative cultural model where “the existing culture did not possess the status of an alternative.”¹⁷ Ben Zion’s effort indeed indicates an attempt at creating a new cultural model that would incorporate a Hebrew Palestinian experience and mediate it through a European stylistic dialect.

Reflected in Ben Zion’s particular program and publishing choices, Hebrew nativeness was to embody the cultural standard of eastern European intellectual Jewry while expressing an “authentic” voice that stemmed from the land. It was a new subjectivity, wavering between East and West and imagined through an (auto-)Orientalist lens. In the first volume of *Ha’omer*, stories

¹³ Govrin, *Ha’omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito*, 1–19.

¹⁴ The journal’s “scientific section” included studies about a variety of topics ranging from Turkish governance to livestock in Palestine.

¹⁵ See Yaron Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Arieh Bruce Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Itamar Even-Zohar, “The Emergence of a Native Hebrew Culture in Palestine, 1882–1948,” *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (1990): 175–91; Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination*; Yael Zerubavel, “Memory, the Rebirth of the Native, and the ‘Hebrew Bedouin’ Identity,” *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 315–52.

¹⁷ Even-Zohar, “Emergence of a Native Hebrew Culture,” 177.

by Moshe Smilansky (signed under the Arabic pen name Hawaja Mussa) and Shami were given the subtitles “From the Life of the Arabs” and “From the Life of the Sephardim,” respectively. These subtitles attested to the journal’s attempt to reflect a supposedly authentic experience of life in Palestine and present it to the “outside” Jewish world.

Indeed, the journal did not address only members of the Yishuv. It was in fact largely oriented toward Jewish readership abroad. According to Govrin, the title chosen for the journal, which echoed the biblical imperative to bring a sheaf of the first grain upon entering the land (the Hebrew *’omer* literally means “sheaf”),¹⁸ reflected the ritualistic role that the editors ascribed to the collection.¹⁹ Framed as the latest harvest of Palestinian Hebrew creativity, it was meant to offer an authentic expression of the land and its inhabitants as the seed of a future cultural and political entity. It is precisely this sentiment that is reproduced in Ben Zion’s feuilleton, in which the speaker boasts about his daughter and presents her to the Zionist world as a “flower of revival.” At the same time, in the feuilleton, the attempt to import an eastern European cultural mode to Palestine fails miserably. The father’s bragging, and his pathetic Zionist rhetoric, are mocked and ridiculed in the text. In this respect, Ben Zion’s feuilleton provides a critical mirroring of the very aspirations that lie at the heart of his cultural project.

Perhaps in an effort to distinguish the journal from other literary journals of the time, primarily the well-known *Ha-shiloah*, it was decided that *Ha-’omer* would accept only literary works originally written in Hebrew. That decision against translated texts was in contrast with earlier plans. In a letter to Ahad Ha’am from 1906, Ben Zion had mentioned his intention to include in the literary part of the collection “stories about the inhabitants of the land of Israel translated from Arabic and other languages.”²⁰ Additionally, Ravnitzky had offered to contribute to the journal Hebrew translations of Yiddish stories. However, these ideas were ultimately rejected, and a more exclusive approach, which rendered Hebrew as a privileged language of Jewish cultural activity in Palestine, was eventually adopted.²¹

The insistence on original Hebrew works coincided with the perception of the Hebrew language as a unifying force, which would potentially protect the nation from a continuous process of disintegration. *Ha-’omer*’s manifesto echoes the familiar notion according to which the nation is in constant danger of dispersion, and it is in the power of language to patch its pieces together and keep its organs intact.²² In fact, the entire text reflects a sense of crisis and urgency: “in this time of catastrophe, when the great and terrible hour has come, such that one might consider it an hour of historical crisis—the voice of our literature has nearly become silent.”²³ Ben Zion stressed that it was in this time particularly that a Hebrew literary platform must be established in the land. The journal came into fruition in the shadow of pogroms in the Russian Empire

¹⁸ Lev. 23:10.

¹⁹ Govrin, *Ha-’omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito*, 59–60.

²⁰ Ben Zion, quoted in Govrin, *Ha-’omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito*, 45.

²¹ The decision not to include translated works in the journal is surprising, particularly in light of the fact that many of the participants, including Ben Zion, were prolific translators. The second issue of *Ha-’omer* even included an important essay by Berdichevsky that was devoted to the question of translation. The decision might have been another attempt to justify the journal’s necessity as a one-of-a-kind expression of original Hebrew creativity. In any case, it aligned with the gradual, ideological shift toward monolingualism and its purported effort to detach Hebrew from “foreign” influences.

²² A very similar rhetoric is used in the mission statement of *Ha-shiloah*. See Ahad Ha’am, “Te’udat *Ha-shiloah*” [*Ha-shiloah*’s mission], *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada’ u-le-’inyanei-ha-hayim* 1 (October 1896): 1–6.

²³ Ben Zion, “Tokhnit *Ha-’omer*,” v.

and an evident decline in publication by the Hebrew press. Yet, not only is the rhetoric of crisis deployed in reference to the violent outbursts in Odessa, but it is also expanded metonymically to encompass a spiritual and linguistic distress.

The following passage of the manifesto reads: “we have also entered a [moment] of great insult that has no precedent in all the days of Diaspora: many of ‘the nation’s lovers’ . . . have begun to mock our worldly language—the spiritual fortress of our nation and its shelter in all times . . . and they are asking our people who have been dispersed to try to forget it completely.”²⁴ That the rendering of catastrophe and crisis shifts so quickly from implying anti-Semitic pogroms to the dangers facing language and literature attests to how deeply entwined these two issues were in the rhetoric of Hebrew revival discourse.

That lingering sense of crisis reverberates throughout metaliterary debates of the first decade of the twentieth century, especially, as Dan Miron has shown, between 1905 and 1907.²⁵ In this period, the number of subscriptions to Hebrew journals decreased dramatically, and daily newspapers such as *Ha-melits*, *Ha-tsifra*, and *Ha-tsofe* were shut down. Hebrew authors repeatedly narrated this cultural crisis, and there was a growing concern that the reviving Hebrew literature might not live up to the expectations set forth a decade or two earlier. And yet, these recurring warnings, which were accompanied by expressions of melancholy and loss, wove an apocalyptic dimension into a discussion that largely revolved around questions of publishing economy and its political conditions. Often, the alarm was associated with the current state of the Hebrew language, and it led to dramatic statements about its impending decay.

Rather than quelling that anxiety, the gradual standardization of Hebrew as a spoken vernacular, particularly in early twentieth-century Palestine, often aggravated it. While Hebrew revival writers largely advocated for the colloquialization of Hebrew and the nascent attempts at Hebrew speech, many of them were also suspicious and ambivalent about these developments. The project of colloquializing Hebrew was sometimes perceived as a dangerous undertaking that would compromise the poetic quality of the language and abolish its particularity. In other words, Hebrew revival literature was often driven by contradictory forces. On the one hand, there was a passionate will to radically change the language and its speakers, to revive and create them anew. On the other hand, a lingering sense of loss evoked by that ongoing transformation was translated into a prophecy of a linguistic apocalypse. The rhetoric of crisis and disaster takes a peculiar turn in the feuilleton “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah.” As we shall see, Ben Zion narrates the Babel-like catastrophe of linguistic multiplicity in Palestine in a satirical, ironic mode. But his satire exposes more than the false representation of Hebrew as a dominant spoken language in the Yishuv. It additionally demonstrates a fundamental anxiety, envisioning the Hebrew native as a linguistically dispersed subject whose spoken Hebrew is composed of a multitude of tongues.

FROM THE FLOWERS OF REVIVAL

David Frishman, a prolific Hebrew feuilletonist in his own right, has noted that the feuilleton should “speak lightly about weighty matters.”²⁶ Ben Zion’s feuilleton undoubtedly complies with

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo’adam: Li-deyokanah shel ha-republikah ha-sifrutit ha-ivrit bi-tehilat ha-me’ah ha-esrim* [When loaners come together: On the portrait of the Hebrew republic of letters in the beginning of the twentieth century] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987), 23–111.

²⁶ David Frishman, “Rak feuilletonistan” [Only feuilletonist], *Ha-tsifra*, 1910.

that demand. Its title, “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” is followed by a subtitle: “Lo bedayah ve-lo bedihah” (No lie and no joke). This subtitle already provides the text with a sarcastic playfulness, as the portrayed hyperbolic anecdote is obviously fictional and, to a large extent, a joke. Bearing Frishman’s comment in mind, however, I propose reading the feuilleton with attentiveness to both its playful and its serious elements. Such a reading will allow a reconstruction of the feuilleton’s ambivalence as well as access to its unconscious telling of the failings of Hebrew revival.

“Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah” opens with a revivalist pathos, uttered in the first person from the mouth of an ardent Zionist:

From the land of our fathers, from the land of revival, I have brought you a flower, my Zionist brothers! Not a *graveside* flower—for you are Zionists, and what do you care for those “graves” that your opponents number for you and the land. Rather, I have brought you [a] flower of life, from [our] new lives!²⁷

While naïvely addressing his “Zionist brothers,” the narrator seemingly denigrates the opponents of Zionism, rejecting their claims as irrelevant. And yet, behind this naïve façade one can immediately sense the ironic overtones that call into question the project of revival and invoke an inherent link between revival and death. The narrator’s speech, however, demonstrates obliviousness to Zionism’s losses. Instead, he announces, Zionism is oriented toward the future and is interested solely in the world of the living.

Indeed, as for the past and its memory, the narrator stresses, “let it rest in peace with the dead.” At the center of *his* anecdote is “a sign of our shining future, and news of revival that awaits us on Mount Zion.”²⁸ That sign, the “flower” of revival, it soon becomes clear, is the narrator’s own daughter, whom he addresses as “bat-Zion” (the daughter of Zion). Hope lies with the future generation, we are told. “And is there any more joyous a sight than that of a beautiful and intelligent child?” the narrator asks. He then delves into the realm of collective memory, referencing another time and place in which intelligent Hebrew-speaking children were a common sight:

Do you remember, my brothers, the midrash that tells of the wisdom of the children of Jerusalem?—Surely there are some remaining among the Zionists who are *still* capable of reading the “dead language,” and they will sometimes recall a saying from our worn-out literature and sigh over what we once had that is no more—well, my daughter shall now come and comfort [those Zionists].²⁹

The narrator’s speech serves a dual function. His unequivocal identification with the Zionist project, on the one hand, and his consistent ironic exposure of the many failures and delusions of this project, on the other, are the backbone of Ben Zion’s text. That ironic tone is striking particularly in light of Ben Zion’s own oeuvre, in which the mission of creating a new Jewish identity is often supported by the narrative, and irony is usually directed at older generations unable to let go of the traditional patterns of Jewish life.³⁰

²⁷ Ben Zion, “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ In Ben Zion’s story “Zqenim” (Old people), for instance, an aging couple remain alone in an empty Jewish *shtetl* after all their children have left town. The two are depicted as a living tomb for a world that no longer exists, oblivious to the echoes of a Zionist awakening which are heard at their doorstep. In a similar vein, in the story “Ha-get” (The bill of divorce), a young couple from Orthodox Jerusalemite families flee Jerusalem for the

The narrator “inadvertently” recalls the fact that among the Zionist promoters of Hebrew revival, true readers of Hebrew are actually scarce. It is in this regard that the narrator’s daughter is summoned to comfort those who are still capable of reading the language and are versed in traditional Jewish sources. She will remind those Hebrew readers of the brilliant children of Jerusalem, those children who, according to midrash Eichah Rabbah, outsmarted the Athenians with their sophisticated puns and particularly strong language skills. We shall return to that allusion later on. For now, it suffices to say that the language skills of the narrator’s daughter are indeed phenomenal. Only eight years old, she speaks eight languages, one for each year of her life.

“You, dear daughter of Zion,” the narrator commends his daughter, “stand up and testify before my people. Become the witness of the revival for them!”³¹ The eight-year-old daughter of Zion is referred to as the fruit of cultural Hebrew labor. She is the ultimate embodiment of the revival movement. We are told that she was born in the aftermath of the first Zionist congress in 1897, in “the age of revival,” as the narrator calls it. Zionist history and its ideological narrative become interwoven in the narrator’s biography. He and his wife are described as former *hovevei tsiyon* (lovers of Zion) who have recently turned into fully-fledged Zionists:

In this accomplished hour, when hearts were beating and souls were filled with all kinds of hopes “of the world,” we have transformed, I and my young wife, from “*Lovers of Zion*” to “Zionists.” And we were then akin to “the Almighty.”³²

This Zionist hubris, in the name of which the young couple believe that they are in fact *almighty*, results in their decision to speak Hebrew in their home, so that Hebrew would become their daughter’s first language. The narrator identifies as a former maskil who had mastered Hebrew in his youth, and his wife, he remarks with pride, had studied the Hebrew Bible as a child. Hence, the two pledge to communicate with their daughter only in Hebrew, so that “the language of the people shall become our daughter’s mother tongue” (*u-tehe sefat ha-’am gam sefat ha-em le-bitenu*).³³

The narrator then admits that although he used to be a Hebrew teacher and even published an article or two in Hebrew, speaking Hebrew does not come naturally: “My wife and I were not accustomed to speaking Hebrew . . . but our desire was great, so we made an effort to speak Hebrew by force and manually [*ba-zro’a u-ve’ezer ha-etsba’ot*].”³⁴ With the aid of hand gestures (the Hebrew *zro’a* means “arm,” alluding to the phrase *be-khoah ha-zro’a*, which also has a violent connotation) to compensate for their lack of vocabulary, the couple resolve to maintain a Hebrew-speaking home. They establish a “society of Hebrew speakers” in their town and try to speak no language other than Hebrew with their Jewish acquaintances. Much like the renowned Ben Yehuda family, who raised their child to speak solely Hebrew, they thus manage to create for themselves a “Hebrew sphere.” In turn, their daughter indeed begins to speak Hebrew, yet

Zionist colony of Petah Tikva, where they intend to free themselves from their families’ Diasporic traditional customs and become “new Jews.” That Zionist sentiment of being “renewed” and mastering one’s faith by speaking Hebrew and starting a new life in Palestine is ridiculed in the feuilleton.

³¹ Ben Zion, “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” 32.

³² *Ibid.*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

even at this early point, the attempt is presented as suspicious, and the word “to speak” is placed in scare quotes.³⁵

The implied reference to the Ben Yehuda family adds an interesting layer to the satirical tone of the piece. As briefly mentioned before, Ben Yehuda’s projects were not well received by Ben Zion and his intellectual circle. Many central figures, both within the new Yishuv and beyond, disapproved of his stylistics and objected to what they perceived as an unrefined and simplistic approach to Hebrew and a clumsy effort to “expand” its vocabulary. In an essay that was included in the same issue of *Ha-’omer*, Ravnitzky invoked the notorious “inventors of words” who had “established special ‘factories’” for the purpose of their dubious creation.³⁶ Ben Zion himself referenced Ben Yehuda in a feuilleton that was published in a later issue, mocking the artificial nature of his lexical renewals.³⁷ And yet the implied reference to the Ben Yehuda family in “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah” is unique in that it acknowledges the family story as a living myth. Naomi Seidman has pointed out that a central component of the Ben Yehuda mythology was his role as a father.³⁸ In adopting the perspective of a father who internalizes his linguistic ideology to the extent of imposing a nonspoken language on his family, Ben Zion at once invokes the myth and dismantles it by naïvely narrating the story in light of the reality of multilingualism.

While at first the parents are said to be thrilled to hear Hebrew words such as *ima*, *aba*, and *esh* (mom, dad, fire) coming from their daughter’s mouth, they soon realize that they are unable to prevent her contact with other languages. The routine of everyday life becomes an obstacle. The husband is at work during the day, the wife is busy taking care of the house, and the daughter is left in the hands of a non-Jewish Russian nanny, who begins to speak Russian to the girl:

Well, in the morning my daughter would “get dressed and bathe in Russian” with her nanny; at lunch, [she would] “eat in Hebrew” with daddy and mommy; afterward, [she would] “stroll in Russian” with the nanny; and in the evening, after a brief chat with mommy and daddy and a “good evening” [*arva tava*] in Hebrew, [then] a Russian bedtime story or a lullaby.³⁹

The daughter, now a toddler of two years, mumbles in Hebrew and Russian simultaneously, and the dream of a monolingual Hebrew-speaking home is shattered early on. Soon after, pogroms break out in the narrator’s hometown, where his parents still live. His father is murdered and his grief-stricken mother moves in with the young family. The grandmother’s only consolation is her little granddaughter, who is “as smart as an angel of God.” But the old widow is startled to learn that the girl “is nothing but a ‘little gentile’ who does not know how to speak even one Jewish word.”⁴⁰ She thus begins to teach her granddaughter Yiddish, and so the three-year-old girl becomes versed in all three languages.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Yehoshua Hanna Ravnitzky, “Al ha-signon ha-’ivri shel ‘Mendelei mocher sefarim” [On the Hebrew style of “Mendele the book peddler”], *Ha-’omer* 1, no. 1 (1907): 23–31.

³⁷ In a feuilleton titled “Be-’ikevei ha-hushma ha-’ivrit” Ben Zion relentlessly mocked Ben Yehuda’s invented word *hushma*, a term meant to provide a Hebrew equivalent for “constitution.” The word is made up of a long acronym, and for Ben Zion, this is the ultimate example of the artificiality and absurdity of Ben Yehuda’s practice of lexical inventions. See Ben Zion, “Be-’ikevei ha-hushma ha-’ivrit” [After the Hebrew *hushma*], *Ha-’omer* 2, no. 3 (1909): 72–91.

³⁸ Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 104.

³⁹ Ben Zion, “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” 35.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Pogroms eventually arrive at the narrator's doorstep and he loses his livelihood. The family resolves to immigrate to Palestine, where the father would become a Hebrew teacher and the daughter could finally speak only one language. Ever since the girl started speaking Russian and Yiddish, the narrator admits, her Hebrew "stopped developing." He further explains apologetically that it was because of "the 'tear' of the Diaspora" (*ha-kerá' she-ba-galut*), with its contesting linguistic pressures, that his daughter became multilingual. Immigration to Palestine is seen as the only possible solution for the increasing existential and linguistic threats that the family faces. The narrator is convinced that "from now on we will no longer exhaust the little one with three languages, [so that] her Hebrew will recover. Well-known are the Hebrew children of the land of Israel, for whom the Hebrew language is a tongue alive in their mouths."⁴¹

However, upon arriving in Palestine, it is initially the girl's Yiddish that is enhanced, for this is the language spoken by the local children who surround her, the sons and daughters of recent immigrants. The four-year-old continues to shift between Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew just like before, only now she speaks Arabic too, as her new nanny is an Arab woman. The girl becomes a mediator between her mother and the Arabic-speaking nanny, and the narrator notes that speaking Arabic might in fact be helpful: "after all, . . . for the time being, this is the language of the people of this land."⁴²

At the age of five, we are told, the daughter is already fluent in French, which she picked up from her Alliance kindergarten teachers in Jerusalem (the narrator explains that he was unable to find a proper Zionist kindergarten in the whole city).⁴³ At the age of six, she speaks Ladino, after hearing her "black- and curly-haired friends" chatter in this language. Her father admits that her Hebrew is getting weaker and weaker, "but what can you demand of this tiny head that contains five other languages?" he proclaims.⁴⁴

When she is seven, the girl is sent to the renowned Rothschild school for girls in Jerusalem, where her father hopes she will deepen her knowledge of Jewish religion and customs. Assuming that along with the study of Judaism would come the study of Hebrew, he is again surprised to discover that after less than six months at the school, his daughter masters English too. The narrator becomes so frustrated with his daughter's English speech, which he cannot keep up with, that once the "Ezra" society of Berlin opens a new Jewish school in Palestine, he immediately sends her there. Finally, at eight years old, German is added to her list of languages.

The episodes of the narrative are comically repetitive. The girl's linguistic biography is piled up year after year. With each new phase, the father's expectations are presented as genuinely naïve, as each pedagogical institution that the daughter is sent to seems to incorporate some level of Hebrew studies. But each time the realistic need to acquire an additional language prevails and eventually overshadows Hebrew. With every attempt to get the girl back on track, matters seem to worsen, and she is continually diverted from speaking Hebrew, while mastering multiple other tongues. But although the girl is multilingual, the text strangely strives to remain monolingual. Unlike in many of his other literary works, Ben Zion avoids using any Arabisms or Yiddishisms in his narration of the feuilleton. Whereas one would have expected that a story

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

about multilingualism would employ various idioms and dialects, the homogeneous linguistic fabric of the text signals its resistance to linguistic diversity.

THE VENGEANCE OF THE DAUGHTER OF ZION: MULTILINGUALISM, MUTENESS, AND CATASTROPHE

Earlier in the feuilleton, the narrator mentions in passing that in the Diaspora, Jews were indeed “expert multilinguals.” His father, for instance, had to be fluent in three languages: the Jargon (Yiddish) for speaking with his family, Russian for business, and Hebrew for speaking with “the Holy One Blessed Be He.” The narrator recalls how his father “sat alone and lamented [in Hebrew] silently.”⁴⁵ For him, Hebrew was first and foremost a sacred language, a silent language of lamentation in which he conversed only with God. The narrator’s mother, despite praying mostly in Yiddish, is said to have “not been satisfied until she poured out her heart in the holy tongue, even though the language was not comprehensible to her at all.”⁴⁶ In both cases, the old generation’s Hebrew is stripped of a social communicative function.

The narrator’s Hebrew differs significantly from the Hebrew of the older generation. It is a maskilic, literary Hebrew utilized outside religious ritual. When he was young, we are told, the narrator was a Hebrew teacher and, more importantly, an aspiring Hebrew writer who had published an article or two in *Ha-melits* (a daily Hebrew newspaper). For the narrator, then, the transformation of Hebrew concerns not only its style or capacity to communicate but also its positioning in relation to other languages. Whereas for his parents, Hebrew was an isolated language, limited either to the synagogue or to the privacy of one’s home, the narrator belongs to a generation who endeavored to turn Hebrew into a language among other languages. As a young maskil, he explains, Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew were not enough; he had to learn German too in order to be able to understand the German interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. His Hebrew is thus depicted as already entwined with, even interrupted or shaped by, other languages. It is precisely upon becoming a normalized language that Hebrew appears to be endangered according to the narrative.

Whereas his father mastered three languages, the narrator is said to have mastered four. And yet nothing compares to the linguistic audacity of the next generation, the fruit of Zionism: children whose parents migrated to Palestine hoping to realize revival in the fullest. These children, “the flowers of revival,” far from being fluent Hebrew speakers, eventually come to embody a modern-day Babel. The biblical figure of Babel has a long history in Zionist discourse, and it recurs particularly in early twentieth-century discussions about language and the dangers of linguistic multiplicity. As Liora Halperin has shown, this figure was often deployed by Zionist leaders to designate simultaneously “the starting point for a teleological history that would and should culminate in linguistic consolidation and also the dystopian end point for Zionist society if it erred on this journey.”⁴⁷ The symbolic realization of Babel in the feuilleton serves a similar purpose. Contrary to the narrator’s expectations, immigration to Palestine does not abolish linguistic multiplicity; instead, it enhances it. Interestingly, multilingualism is depicted here not as opposite to but as the very result of the efforts to revitalize Hebrew speech and reterritorialize it in Palestine. In the feuilleton, Hebrew revival bears the risk of becoming a wild multilingual outburst.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Halperin, *Babel in Zion*, 24.

The outcome is indeed catastrophic. Despite the humorous tone, which is maintained throughout the piece, the feuilleton also gestures toward a dystopian horizon. Through a series of charged phrases that are interwoven into the narrator's speech, the text alludes to the book of Lamentations and midrash *Eichah Rabbah*. These allusions supplement the narrative with an apocalyptic dimension and repeatedly signal the links between Hebrew speech and muteness and between revival and death.

Let us look back at the feuilleton's opening paragraph. In the very second sentence, the seemingly positive title, which references a "flower of revival," is contrasted with the mention of a "graveside flower."⁴⁸ When the narrator then invokes the intelligence of the children of Jerusalem, he cites *Eichah Rabbah*. But although his speech is proud and positive, the reference foreshadows an impending disaster. In *Eicha Rabbah*, the midrashic stories about the intelligent children of Jerusalem are followed by horrific descriptions of violence and death, including the death of children. The book of Lamentations and the midrash that interprets it focus on one of the most catastrophic events in Jewish history, the destruction of the Temple. In the feuilleton, the revivalist rhetoric of the narrator indicates that his story has nothing to do with the morbidity of the Jewish past. Yet his allusions consistently subvert these statements and cast a dark irony on the text as a whole.

Irony is further heightened with the mention of *bat Zion*, the daughter of Zion. In the book of Lamentations, the figure of the lamenting, weeping daughter of Zion is a gendered personification of the city of Jerusalem, which stands for the mourning nation. This figure is transformed in Ben Zion's feuilleton into the multilingual daughter of the narrator. Instead of bringing consolation to the hearts of mourners, the girl becomes a sign of a distressing reality. But it is implied that only some could see the danger. It is recognizable only to those "remaining among the Zionists who are *still* capable of reading the 'dead language,' and . . . recall a saying from our worn-out literature."⁴⁹ They are the ones who are able to identify, over the head of the narrator and those like him, the irony and the morbid allusions that surround the narrative and thus to understand its latent warning.

The figure of a mythological lamenting woman appears in yet another work by Ben Zion, published in the same issue of *Ha'-omer*. In "Rachel," Ben Zion depicts the biblical matriarch as emerging from her tomb on the road to Bethlehem, crying and refusing to be consoled for the death of her children.⁵⁰ Whereas in the feuilleton, the catastrophic destruction of the Temple is merely alluded to, "Rachel" is filled with gruesome descriptions of myriad slaughtered Jewish victims throughout the ages, drawing links between the current pogroms in Russia and the biblical *hurban*. Within the mythological cycle of the narrative, death, destruction, and lamentation become inseparable from Jewish temporality, recurring over and over again. Toward the end of the piece, however, the figure of Rachel transforms from "the mother of mercy" to a "mother of vengeance," and her long silence and lament are replaced by a murderous attack directed simultaneously against her sons and their enemies. Finally, Rachel becomes a symbol of the hopeful return to the land of Israel following the destruction of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

While "Rachel," which is written in a poetic, biblical idiom, marks Ben Zion's attempt to realize the mission of *Ha'-omer* and create a literary style embedded in the rhythm and ambiance

⁴⁸ Ben Zion, "Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah," 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Simhah Ben Zion, "Rachel," *Ha'-omer* 1, no. 1 (1907): 11–29.

of the land of Israel, “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah” seems to voice his lingering skepticism about this very attempt. In fact, in their own way, both works tell the story of Jewish immigration to Palestine and both center on a symbolic female character who is meant to offer either pride or consolation. But if the story of Rachel pathetically narrates the immigration to Palestine as a mythical event, the feuilleton employs irony to soberly reflect on the prosaic aspects of that immigration story, while questioning precisely the pathetic inclination of Zionist rhetoric. Critics have largely deemed “Rachel” a literary failure and rejected Ben Zion’s attempt to bind together biblical and contemporary events as forced and unnatural.⁵¹ Yet Ben Zion considered this work to be his serious poetic contribution to *Ha’omer* and published it under his own Hebraized name, while signing the feuilleton with the pseudonym *mi-bnei ha-Zamzumim*.⁵² Once again, the feuilleton emerges as simultaneously mirroring and undermining Ben Zion’s broader cultural conviction, drawing attention to the failings of his “proper” literary speech.

A sense of catastrophe, it appears, is present in both stories. In “Rachel,” the brutal revenge of the bereaved mother is posited as the very condition for the reawakening that follows. In “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” however, the naïvety of the narrator renders him blind to the catastrophic dimension of multilingualism and the exilic multiplicity that is manifested precisely in the space of the “homeland.” Nevertheless, in both works the fantasy of creating Hebrew nativeness as both a reflection of the self and its radical transformation advances through the realm of disaster, be it an existential or a linguistic one.

Despite his overall tone of acceptance, at some points in the feuilleton even the narrator seems to be startled by his daughter. When the girl begins to tease her father by speaking to him only in English, knowing that he has not mastered that language, the narrator mentions that “[the English language] has already twisted my daughter’s lips, such that she twists her little mouth to a point so shocking that I nearly have a spasm.”⁵³ In another place, the narrator confesses:

This child asks me a question, and I, her father, who has reached the age of wisdom and has seen and heard a lot in his day, stand like a golem, unable to reply appropriately. . . . She speaks to me, and I stand before her like this mute, who is unable to speak even though his heart is gushing.⁵⁴

Ultimately, the daughter’s multilingualism results in her father’s muteness. The more languages she speaks, the more silent he becomes. The wish to create Hebrew nativeness is “realized” here at the expense of the older generation’s voice. Hebrew, as the narrator perceives it, is replaced by a multitude of tongues that are beyond his comprehension and control. It is in this respect that revival is revealed to be a dangerous undertaking. For once the daughter—the ultimate object of revival—speaks, the integrity of the project threatens to collapse.

Muteness is a common trope in Hebrew revival literature and its metaliterary debates. As mentioned earlier, these debates were often steeped in an atmosphere of crisis, which rendered either the people or the literature “mute.” Ben Zion’s “Rachel” repeatedly evokes the continuous silence of Rachel’s tomb, and the dead matriarch constantly wavers between lament and muteness, which is metonymically extended to the entire nation. In *Ha’omer*’s manifesto, the

⁵¹ See, e.g., Fikhman, “S. Ben Zion,” x; Govrin, *Ha’omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito*, 83–84.

⁵² Nurit Govrin discovered that it was Ben Zion who wrote the piece, as it was mentioned in one of his letters to Ahad Ha’am. See Govrin, *Ha’omer: Tnufato shel ktav et ve-aharito*, 96.

⁵³ Ben Zion, “Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah,” 37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 32. That quotation repeats itself almost word for word toward the end of the feuilleton, on p. 38, so that the text opens and ends with the assertion of the father’s muteness.

editor states that the journal is emerging at a time of catastrophe, in which “the voice of our literature has nearly become silent.”⁵⁵ Similarly, in an essay published that same year under the title “Ha-sifrut ha-ilemet” (The mute literature), writer and critic Mordechai Ehrenpreis used the exact same terminology to describe what he considered to be the wretched state of modern Hebrew literature. Ehrenpreis’s essay, which was published in *Ha-shiloah* in 1907, depicted in great detail the sudden “mutism” that had taken over Hebrew literature:

Have you ever experienced the startling event of a relative becoming mute? Just yesterday you were in his company, enjoying his exuberant speech and joyful laughter. . . . And the next day . . . he stands before you as a helpless child; some sounds emerge from his throat that are peculiar, wild, non sequiturs: he has suddenly become mute. . . .

Such a terrifying event has occurred within our literature these past few years. It had just awoken to a new era of youth and a new [era] of prosperity . . . but it lost its power of speech almost overnight, and its lips only mutter fragmented words.⁵⁶

The essay is rhetorically organized around the quest to identify the source of that sudden mutism. After exploring several answers, the writer concludes that Hebrew literature, which was flourishing only a decade or two earlier, has lost its power of speech because of its readers, “because its people became deaf.” Ehrenpreis argues that Hebrew literature lacks a deserving readership. It is detached both from the older generation, who are indifferent to its refined poetic sensibilities, and from the younger generation, who are opening up to the world and are thus versed in other languages and cultures, straying further and further away from Hebrew. Ehrenpreis’s critique is aimed at the people for “having no ears for us.” But he also acknowledges that the project of “seeking the redemptive synthesis between the Jewish and the European,” in which Hebrew literature has been most eagerly invested, has failed its audience.⁵⁷

The centrality of deafness and muteness as highly charged metaphors used to portray the nation’s relationship to its collective memory and cultural tradition is not unique to Hebrew literature. The mute and the deaf, which are two sides of the same coin, often appear in national and colonial contexts as characteristics of the figure of “the native.” Literary theorist Marc Nichanian shows how literature written in a national vernacular often understands itself as “making it possible for the people to hear *themselves* and enter into a relation with themselves . . . [and] to give a voice to those who had so far been deprived of a voice . . . because what they said did not reach their own ears.”⁵⁸ Nichanian explains that this is the moment in which literature intervenes. Making the native “hear” necessarily involves a “supplementary organ of writing.” Literature is summoned because “the project consists in confronting [the native] with himself by way of a mediation (a corpus of knowledge, a common language, a written culture, an informed memory) so that he may once again hear his own ears.”⁵⁹ That mediation, the supplementary organ of writing, is national literature, with its purist monolingual conviction.

⁵⁵ Ben Zion, “Tokhnit *Ha’-omer*,” v.

⁵⁶ Marcus Ehrenpreis, “Ha-sifrut ha-ilemet” [The mute literature] (1907), in *Le-an? Masot sifrutiyot* [Whither? Literary essays] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1998), 240–41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁸ Marc Nichanian, *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 46.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

However, in both Ehrenpreis's essay and Ben Zion's feuilleton, mutism is attributed not to "the native" but rather to national literature itself. It is Hebrew literature, in its purported mediating power, which experiences itself as mute. Strikingly, the source of that mutism is understood as the people, especially the younger generation, whom modern Hebrew literature sought to transform and create anew. This inverted relationship between literature and the people stems, in part, from Hebrew's liminal standing. The esoteric state of the language, fervently safeguarded by elite writers who are daunted by the buzzing sound of artificial Hebrew speech, positions Hebrew literature in a state of constant discordance and clash with its prospective audience.

This discordance may explain the failure of *Ha'-omer* to sustain a steady platform for modern Hebrew culture in Palestine. The attempt to create Palestinian Hebrew nativeness in the image of eastern European culture, the fantasy of "a redemptive synthesis between the Jewish and the European," as Ehrenpreis would have it, or between East and West, as reflected in the program of *Ha'-omer*, is reified as the disintegration of language and identity. That failure is clearly portrayed in Ben Zion's feuilleton, which invites an allegorical interpretation. The feuilleton satirically narrates the creation of a Hebrew native, within a journal whose declared purpose is to establish native Hebrew culture. But in the feuilleton, the father/creator becomes mute once the child speaks.

Finally, Hebrew as a revived language in the mouth of children is found to be disassembled. By the end of the feuilleton the narrator states that every day "this naughty child begins to speak to me in the language I'm so fond of, in Hebrew, and suddenly she jumps from Hebrew to German, from German to Arabic, from Arabic to French, from French to Jargon, from Jargon to Spanish, from Spanish to Russian, and from Russian—oy! To English."⁶⁰ In the daughter's speech, Hebrew unfolds and breaks apart into the various components that the Zionist enterprise wishes to force and melt into one another in the process of forming a unified, monolingual front. That collapse leaves the father speechless, and he laments, once again, "And I, her father, . . . stand before her like a golem, like this mute, who is unable to speak even though his heart is gushing."⁶¹

That fatherly mutism is the crisis that the architects of revival experience every time they face their own creation, the living language(s) in the mouths of children. This crisis is presented in metaliterary discussions of the time as the disaster of modern Hebrew literature. And it is in the name of this disaster that linguistic multiplicity is suppressed, and multilingualism is viewed as destructive. The silence of the fathers of Hebrew revival literature paves the way for the violence of linguistic isolation and purity. It is that haunting threat that evokes the urge to mute the various voices of otherness that sprout in the wake of revival. [A]

⁶⁰ Ben Zion, "Mi-pirhei ha-tehiyah," 38.

⁶¹ Ibid.