ON THE REVIVAL OF HEBREW: ALLUSION AND LINGUISTIC TENSIONS IN THE FORMATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND CANON

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In a talk more broadly on Jewish mythic etymologies (‘ety-mythology’), Ghil’ad Zuckermann provocatively referred to contemporary Hebrew as a distinct language known as “Israeli” (“Language and Identity: ‘Lexical Engineering’ in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Israeli as a Tool for Judging Other Cultures,” Institute for Advanced Studies at Hebrew University, 3 December 2004). In his rejection of “Israeli” as a modifier (i.e., “Israeli Hebrew”) and his deployment of it in a nominative sense, Zuckermann obviously meant to polemicize and assert that the language fashioned over the past hundred years exhibits an overwhelming disjunction with the Hebrew of earlier periods.

Such a proposition has generated an outcry among students of the history of Hebrew. It may seem strange that such a seemingly arcane matter could trigger shouts and calls for censure, but in the case of Israel the integral ties between language and ideology become glaringly apparent. The revival of the Hebrew language was part and parcel of the Zionist movement and is a defining feature of Jewish nationalism and of Israeli culture. (Benjamin Harshav, Language in Time of Revolution). Thus, the Holy Tongue was to serve as the medium for the negation of the diaspora and the creation of the New Hebrew Man and the New Hebrew Culture [cf. Yael Zerubavel, Recovered Roots; Yaron Ezrahi, Rubber Bullets].

In this paper I explore the issue of Hebrew continuity and discontinuity from an intertextual perspective, including the ways in which allusion to traditional texts and idioms was a substitute for missing layers of a language that remained nearly totally unspoken for nineteen hundred years [cf. Itamar Even Zohar, “Polysystem Theory”]. I also look at the ways in which such intertextual patterning served somewhat paradoxically both a sanctioning and canonizing function; new texts gained authority from connection with the motifs and lexicon of the classics of Jewish tradition while simultaneously taking on something of their aura. In an extension of the midrashic mode of interpretation and its tolerance for multiple interpretations, I also show how an important feature of the new literature was its subjecting the literary tradition to subversive readings [cf. Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence]. The process has led to the formation of a new corpus of prestigious literature and an examination of the salient features involved can add to our understanding of the general dynamics of canonization.