

# Finding the right words for a nation in formation

## Resurrecting Hebrew tells the epic story of a linguistic hero

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Washington Jewish Week

In the Zionist firmament, whose star burns the brightest? Which founding father's contribution was most important for the successful establishment of the Jewish state?

David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the prestate Jewish community in British Mandatory Palestine and Israel's first prime minister, is a strong candidate.

So is Chaim Weizmann, who helped convince the British government to issue the Balfour Declaration, which conferred international legitimacy upon the Zionist enterprise. Weizmann was the country's first president.

Then there was Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who inspired the Revisionist Zionists and that movement's longtime leader Menachem Begin, who signed the historic peace agreement with Egypt's Anwar Sadat.

Or maybe it's a member of the next generation of leaders: Yitzhak Rabin, who, as chief of staff, led the Israel Defense Forces to victory in the 1967 Six Day War and in 1995 became a martyr to Israel's attempts to achieve peace.

They're all strong candidates, but my choice is neither a military nor political leader; it is Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, a stubborn scholar who, along with a handful of like-minded people, achieved the impossible — they brought back from the near-dead, and modernized, the ancient language of the Jewish people.

So when I heard about Ilan Stavans' *Resurrecting Hebrew* (Schocken), I knew that the book would focus on Ben-Yehuda, and I looked forward to learning more about this amazing linguist.

The book revolves around a dream the author supposedly had (a literary device?), which he came to interpret as his fear that he



Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, "the father of modern Hebrew"

was losing the Hebrew he had learned as a child.

So he decided to learn more about the language and Ben-Yehuda, the man most associated with its revival.

Born in 1858 into a hasidic family in the village of Luzhky in what is now Belarus, Eliezer Yitzhak Perelman (Ben-Yehuda's birth name) was attracted to Hebrew because it was the universal language — at least in religious matters — of the Jews.

Driven by his vision, he made aliya in 1881

and settled in Jerusalem. He immediately Hebraized his name — his father's name was Yehuda so he became "Ben-Yehuda," the son of Yehuda.

The linguist was not alone in his dream of reviving Hebrew, the author notes, but one of a "quixotic generation of Zionists" who pushed for using the language in the schools and in research.

But his zeal was not to be exceeded by his colleagues. Stavans quotes a famous passage from Ben-Yehuda's book *A Dream Come True* in which the linguistic pioneer notes that even though his pregnant wife was weak, she agreed "not to employ a housemaid, so that the child would not hear the sounds of any language other than Hebrew.... We feared that those foreign sounds would impair his faculty for hearing Hebrew, the Hebrew words would not be absorbed adequately and properly, and the child might not speak Hebrew."

### The blessing of polyglotism

Ben-Yehuda made a modest living teaching, editing, and writing, but when he ran afoul of the Turkish authorities who ruled Palestine before World War I, he had to curtail his teaching and editing and concentrate on his life's mission — the creation of a dictionary that would resurrect Hebrew and make it viable for the Zionists returning to their ancient land.

Some of the stops Stavans makes on his odyssey are memorable. For example, he talks to a professor who has identified some 20 Jewish languages.

Or the dialogue he has with writer/trans-

lator Hillel Halkin that begins: "Is polyglotism not a blessing?" to which the writer/translator replies: "Of course it is, not only for the Jews but for the entire human race."

The more languages, the better, Halkin continues, deriding the notion that common language equals more understanding and better relations ("Some of the cruelest wars in history," he notes, "have been fought between people who speak the same language").

But from these engaging sidetracks, fortunately, the author always returns to Ben-Yehuda. For instance, he searches for a plaque on Abyssinian Street (now Rehov Etiopia), outside the Orthodox Mea She'arim quarter in Jerusalem commemorating that Ben-Yehuda had lived there.

Stavans discovers that zealously Orthodox Jews destroyed the plaque, "still angry with Ben-Yehuda for having taken Hebrew from the Bible into the streets."

Interestingly, despite vilifying the scholar, many Orthodox Jews attended his funeral in 1922, along with Jewish pioneers and businessmen, Jewish soldiers, Christians, and Arabs. Stavans quotes author Robert St. John as writing "Palestine wept" in *Tongue of the Prophets*.

Stavans finds traces of paint on Ben-Yehuda's gravestone on the Mount of Olives. The graffiti was sprayed on by fanatical Orthodox Jews, he discovers.

The author relates that when one of the linguist's relatives was informed of the desecration, she asked, "In what language was the graffiti splashed on?"

"In Hebrew."

"Ah, then Ben-Yehuda won." ■

## TUESDAY, Oct. 7

Congregation Beth Shalom, Red Bank, holds a **shofar-blowing contest** at 8 p.m. open to the public. Shofars, pizza, and refreshments will be provided. Contact 732-741-1657 or redbankrabbi@yahoo.com.

## SUNDAY, Oct. 12

Temple Beth Miriam, Elberon, holds a **Buck a Roo Barbeque** at 4 p.m., featuring square dancing in the sukka. Admission is \$5, \$20 maximum per family. RSVP to 732-222-3754.

## THURSDAY, Oct. 16

Monmouth County NCJW visits the **Jewish Heritage Museum of Monmouth County**, Freehold, at noon. Refreshments will be served.

## FRIDAY, Oct. 17

The Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Center at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft presents a teacher workshop, **"The Exhibit: A Journey to Life," Preparing Your Students for the Museum Experience**, 1-3 p.m. at Warner Student Life Center, Navesink Room 1. RSVP to 732-224-2769.

## MONDAY, Oct. 20

The Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Center at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft presents **Talking with Survivors of the Rwandan Genocide**, for high school juniors and seniors and BCC students, at 9:15 a.m. Space is limited; RSVP to 732-224-2769.

## TUESDAY, Oct. 21

Social Jewish Singles holds a **Meet and Mingle for ages 55-plus** at 7:30 p.m. at the Park Avenue Seafood Bistro, Freehold. Admission (\$10) includes a hot appetizer buffet and cash bar. Contact socjsingles@aol.com or 732-521-8272.

The Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Center at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft presents **The Genocide in Rwanda: Aftermath and Rebuilding** at 7:30 p.m. at Warner Student Life Center, Navesink Room 1. Space is limited; RSVP to 732-224-2769.

## THURSDAY, Oct. 23

The Manchester Branch of the Ocean County Library hosts a discussion of Johanna Kaplan's **O My America!**, 1-3 p.m., part of "A Mind of Her Own: Fathers and Daughters in a Changing World," a five-part book discussion series led by Dr. Ali Botein-Furrevige of Ocean County College, and part of the program "Let's Talk About It: Jewish Litera-

ture — Identity and Imagination." Call 732-657-7600 or visit [www.theoceancountylibrary.org](http://www.theoceancountylibrary.org).

The Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Center at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft presents **Talking with Holocaust Survivors** at 1:30 p.m. at MAN 212. RSVP to 732-224-2769.

## SUNDAY, Oct. 26

The JCC of Western Monmouth County in Manalapan sponsors **Mitzvah Day 2008**, collecting toys, clothing, and food county-wide, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. For drop-off locations and times, call 732-683-9300.

## SUNDAY, Nov. 2

Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu presents **The Art of Bikkur Cholim** at 10 a.m. at the Ruth Hyman JCC, Deal. A kosher brunch will be served. RSVP at [www.jfcsmonmouth.org/bikkurcholim](http://www.jfcsmonmouth.org/bikkurcholim) or call 732-774-2990 by Oct. 19.

## ONGOING

The Jewish Heritage Museum of Monmouth County, Freehold, holds an exhibit, **"Jacob Landau: Humanist and Visionary,"** through Oct. 26. Hours are Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., Sundays, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. (closed for religious holidays). Call 732-252-6990.