While rabbinic scholars had always preserved and conserved Hebrew and Aramaic sacred texts, and as Eckstein has shown basic Hebrew literacy was always required from the second temple to the medieval ages of the average Jew to participate in the synagogue, the language emerged from the Haganah, Lehi and Stern Gang, and Etzel parties underground in the rise of the Israeli state from the ashes of the Holocaust. The trajectory of this Phoenix like rebirth goes back to antiquity with Hebrew as the root of Jewish survival and continuity. Tehiyah was a revolt against assimilation and traditional religiosity so that Zionist luminaries like Ahad Ha’am, Judah Leib Gordon, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Micah Joseph Berdichevsky, and Eliezer ben Yehudah. The revivalists wanted to reform the Jewish school curriculum and Israeli infrastructure. The revivalists felt that the diaspora had left Jews with a no-win choice between assimilation and anti-Semitism. Thus radical Zionists spoke of negation of the diaspora (shalal-hagalut) and the galut was characterized in part by speaking foreign tongues even if cultural Jewish languages like Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, or Yiddish. Ben Yehudah’s logic was that if modern minded Jews resettled the Holy Land and spoke only Hebrew, Hebrew literature would be saved and in turn the Jewish people saved and taken out of their meoffenes (subservient) relationship to host cultures. Thus the birth of the “speak Hebrew movement” to avoid Hebrew linguicide noted by Israel Efros, President of the Baltimore Hebrew College (similar to Hebrew colleges in NY, Boston (Boston Hebrew College), Chicago (Spertus) and Philadelphia (Graetz)) in his Vygvanim Shotkim (silent wigwams). However this recent decline was preceded by various renaissances of Hebrew language in history. The early rabbis’ preservation of Hebrew following the Babylonian exile, the challenges posed by Arabic, and the prolific use of Hebrew in Diaspora art, spirituality, and science across millennia is documented in Jewish history. Some Christians had problems with Hebrew from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation, while during the Renaissance many philosemites like Herder, Pico de Mirandelo, and Reichlin learned and cherished Hebrew to give them a better sense of the truths of their own religion. Hebrews rivalry with Yiddish, led many Zionists to make modern Hebrew a reality in Eretz Yisrael, and today we see the resurgence of a pre-Holocaust textual ethos is striving to be renewed today by Orthodox Jews to teach and communicate in Yiddish over Hebrew.

Rav Yehudah HaLevy’s formulation in the Kuzari that the three essential elements in Judaism are (1) the Hebrew language, (2) Torah, and (3) the land of Israel. However in modern times we must be sensitive to the process of accleration and assimilation that also occurred during the Hellenist area in ancient 2nd temple Palestine, on Hebrew whereby once the Jews began to leave the ghettos and assimilate into the secular world, Hebrew was displaced by the lingua franca of the host culture. As the cycles of history would have it Hebrew was again reinvented as a modern national language but this time in the Land of Israel spoken by the sabra and with Israeli Independence in 1948 came Kol Yisrael (The Voice of Israel) the official Hebrew broadcasting service of the Jewish state.

While Theodor Herzl assumed that German would be the national language of the Jewish homeland, lexicographer Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, Nathan Alterman, and their colleagues devoted themselves to nothing less than the remaking of the Hebrew language. Particularly in Shai Yosef Agnon’s prose we find represented the beauty of the evolution of the Hebrew language from the traces of the language of the Tanakh (which itself is a diverse hodgepodge of genres such as narrative, prophecy, poetry, law, proverbs, philosophy, elegy, etc with loan words as Kutscher has shown), the
Mishnah, Talmudim, Midrashim, siddurim, medieval liturgical creativity in piyutim, kinot, and Azharot, Halakhic Codes (Tur, MT., Shulchan Arukh), the rise of medieval lexigraphical works such as Rav Sadia Gaon’s Egron (a rhyming dictionary) and medieval grammarians such as Rav ibn Janah and the Redak and the debate between Menachem and Dunash ibn labrat around the correct method for identifying the root consonants up unto the Maharal, GRA, and Rabbi Yakov Emdem’s plea that the curriculum include the study of grammar (dikduk), science works by Shabbatain Donnolo, and Sefer Hakhmoni (ca 946) and the scientific works of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra and later the Maaseh Tuviyah (Venice 1707) and philosophy of the classic Jewish philosophic rishonim, Jewish folkloric works, Hasidic tales, Israeli fiction. Israeli fiction followed a Biblical Hebrew model from Mapu (Ahavat Tsiyon) to much slang and Israeli idioms today employed by Amoz Oz, A B Yehoshua, etc. Poetry from Gordon to Yehudah Amichai, has also reinvented the language which continues to evolve and is monitored by the Academie Loshon Evreit, made up of great Hebrew linguists, philologists, and lexicographers. Newly coined words for cars (mikonit), refrigerators (mikarer), and icecream (borrowed from Italian gelato) came into being to the recent Merkavah tank and Uzi machine gun (i.e. from Dovid HaMelekh’s remark in Tehillim- “Hashem Uzi (Hashem is my strength)”. Thus enjoying Agnon’s oeuvre is like enjoying a linguistic layer cake or excavating the tree rungs of a tree that has evolved across millenia. Agnon lets us see a chain of transmission of the Hebrew language itself beyond the masorah of the religious but up until the rebirth of Hebrew in the modern state.

As Shmuel Krauss and Menachem Stern have shown at least 1000 Greek and Latin words are found in the Talmudim and Midrashim such as kategor (prosecutor), pinkas (writing pad), polmos (conflict), Karon (carriage), pundak (tavern), kruv (cabbage), Sanhedrin (court of 71), pros bul, afikoman, etc. Agnon as a great Hebrew writer makes the reader sensitive how the Hebrew language in galut, often picks up traces of its host cultures. Agnon developed and put together the Hebrew language in ways that had not been done before, but also in a socio-historic and linguistic mode lets us see the “tree rings” of the development of the Hebrew language, its archeological excavated layers that have undergone seismic shifts, sea changes, and turning points and paradigm shifts [Paradigmenwechsel] so that today as Ezekiel says “these bones live.” Agnon’s work lets us appreciate the unique characteristics of an eternal language capable of conveying the most powerful ideas of world cultures.

As Chomsky notes in Hebrew: The Eternal Language, Hebrew historically changed more slowly than other languages so that a modern Israeli can pick up the bible and understand it basically although she may encounter some difficult hapex legomena in Shirat HaYam, but a 20th century American cannot read Chaucer of Bewulf unless trained to read old English or likewise a Frenchman trained to read La Chanson de Roland or the Renaissnace poetry of DuBellay. Unlike other languages Hebrew never gets old but is literally the source of the world cultures as a “field of force.” Ad fontes! Thus Reformation Protestants frequently noted that that Hebrews “drink from the fountains, the greeks from the streams, ,and the Latins from the pools. “ This is based on a sense of revelation from a sacred textual tradition that began on Sinai.

While for the traditionally religious Orthodox Hebrew is sacred, a leshon ha-kodesh, or language so holy that they insist on using Yiddish for everyday transactions, how Hebrew was reinvented and reborn to serve as the lingua franca of the modern Jewish state, now used in particular mundane exchanges such as buying vegetables in the Machenai Yehudah market or sitting in a café on Eliezer ben Yehudah street.
schmoozing with friends is the work of modern Zionist pioneers. Philosophically Religious Jews reject Plato’s Cratylus that Hebrew like any language is conventional and contingent, i.e. the product of merely human practical communication, but rather traditionalists view Hebrew as the language by which G-d creates and Adamic Hebrew is given by G-d and forever charged with sanctity as the Garden of Eden is a state of resurrection, and according to sefer Yetzirah Hebrew was spoken there by Adam and Chava.

The miraculous survival of Hebrew over several millennia of history is remarkably awesome and wonderous and owes thanks to the rabbis who cherished the language that the Tanakh was written in. Today the people of Israel speak Hebrew as their ancient forefathers did so that the historical trajectory of the Hebrew Bible in galut through translations such as the Targumim (Aramaic), Septuagint (Greek), Vulgate (Latin), Peshita (syriac), Tafsir (Arabic), Beur (German), Die Heilige Schriften und Ihren Bedeutung (German), Ladino versions, Shmuel Teich (Yiddish) has come full circle, as Hebrew has come home again, as the ancestral tongue (he patrios phone) to reside in the land of Israel spoken on the tongues of its inhabitants who walk on the same stones as did Avraham, Isaac, and Yakov, and whose children play in playground hide and seek, hop scotch, four square, and marbles to the tune of a Hebrew cadence.

Yet even in the mundane use of Hebrew we must appreciate Hebrew’s destiny- laddenessness and uniqueness (die Schicksal laddenheit des Heilige Languesprache) in the cosmic linguistic soup. When G-d says to Jeremiah, “what do you see” and Jeremiah responds “I see an almond branch” (shaked), G-d emphasizes Hebrews unique status by replaying, “Das it righting (that is right)... I am watchful (shoked) over my word to have it realized (on the stage of history).” Not only is this pusek representative of the creative linguistic play in the form of a pun, caused by a simple vowel change on the three root letter Shaked, but Hebrew is endowed with a fateful almost prophetic bewitching causality grounded in a reality of eternal truths that destins the flow of history and human events. G-d Himself thus rules over and is the director of a mystical linguistic calculus, not as the Christians hold ending in Chiasmus, but a brighter messianic revelation for human beings destiny. This sacred power of the language draws on the mystical power of the 22 otiot combined with the 1st ten numerals correlating to the ten divine attributes (sefirot) from which all of ek-sistence emanates (Hishtaltut) pleromatically. Yet as PA notes Gematriot, notrikon, and atbash are the after dinner drinks of the divine banquet above, as we must prepare ourselves in the vestibule of this life (olam hazeh) to enter the metrakalin (banquet hall). One cannot drive the merkavah drunk on after dinner drinks (gematria, notrikon, atbash) so Rava and Rav Ashi caution that one fill their bellys with the halakhah which is the meat and potatoes or chulent of a nourishing intellectual diet. In modernity Like scientists engaged in the wonders of stem cell and cloning it is as if G-d saw to the rebirth of Hebrew in the land of Israel as if taking the DNA of the language out of refrigeration so that “the dry bones might live again.” Because Hebrew is in essence a holy language, as Ramban notes that the whole torah is an encryption of Hashem’s divine names, Hebrew takes on a mystical dimension denoted by the sod in PaRDes standing for the methodological interpretative strategies of Peshat, remez, and derosh.

Hebrew as a unique eternal (see Chomsky) language with infinite power. Not just one of many Canaanite dialects in antiquity but rather the language which according to the Bible itself G-d created the world with, and Adam and Eve spoke in the garden of Eden. Hebrew is the expression of the zeitgeist of the Jewish people across millenia, revitalized by the 19th century Zionist movement, the timeless vehicle of Jewish creativity, and high culture (tarbut/Bildung) one of whose outgrowths was the Va’ad Akadamie ha-Lashon).
Particularly in the Renaissance Christian scholars became Hebraists whose linguistic and cultural ecosystem recognized the importance of returning to the sources (ad fontes). At least since Church fathers Origin and Jerome, Christian recognition that knowledge of Hebrew enhances appreciation of the Christian religion, as well as unlocking the esoteric power of Hebrew divine names essential to decoding the chyistic patterns in the synoptic gospels. Aramic adds understanding to Christianity as Jesus spoke Aramaic as when he resurrects a person saying “Lech veKum.” Recognition of the essential component that Hebrew played for Verus Israel testified to the Christian belief in hebraica veritas. Christians recognized that Hebrew was the language of divine revelation so that Francis Bacon proclaimed that Hebrew possesses the explosive powers for good and evil. Thus some Christians set about learning Hebrew as the rise of Ramsey’s dictionary Ars loguendi et intellegendi in lingua Hebraica is one of many examples. Notably the Victorians felt respect for Jewish learning and the Hebrew language as found in George Elliot’s novel Middlemarch where the married couple goes to Israel to Honeymoon. Mark Twain also felt compelled to travel to Israel and his account of the desolation contrasts vividly with the state today that is a leader in biotech, start up companies, and agriculture.

While as Jeremy Cohen has noted in the medieval times (See the Friars and the Jews) medieval Christian desire to learn Hebrew was often in order to either prosleytize the Jews or to beat the Jews at their own rabbinic hermeneutical interpretive heretical beliefs. The Renaissance Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) believed that knowledge of Hebrew was the “key” (maphteach) by which to unlock the unifying universal truths uncovered in diverse texts as those by Plato, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Hermes Trismegistus, Moses, and Jesus. Ficino’s disciple Pico della Mirandola was convinced that the Hebrew literature of the Kabbalah was the true transcript of what Moses heard at Sinai whereby Kabbalah provided the point of connection and fraternity between the Father (Judaism) and the son (Christianity) religions. Johannes Reuchlin, author of De arte cabalistica (1517) and Pico’s star pupil was a German humanist who employed three decoding tools such as gemaria, notarikon, and temurah (systematically exchanging each letter for another in acrostic format) to discover hidden truths. Christian Kabbalists would include such scientific rationalists as Francis Bacon, Giordano Bruno, Wilhelm Leibniz and Isaac Newton. For these Christian Kabbalists Hebrew as the lingua humana, a perfect language, that might resolve the controversies and contradictions of the sacred texts to be cleared up. As recently as the Pilgrims to America the settlers who built New England saw themselves as latter day Israelites, naming all their children by Biblical names, brought by Providence to a second promised land etc. whereby they named all their children by Biblical names and it was believed by knowing Hebrew essentially undid or reverse Bavel thereby defeating Satan. One of the reasons given for the destruction of the 2nd temple besides sinat hinam encapsulated in the Kamsa bar Kamsa sugya of the gemarah is that the children did not learn the Hebrew alphabet. The Besht holds that all wisdom and cosmic secrets stem from the 22 letters of this Hebrew alphabet.

The messianic implications of Hebrews reborn status today in the land of Israel is hinted at. As Zephaniah (3:9) notes “If only the nation would return to Hebrew, it would ultimately become the language of humankind by which `all nations shall call on His name and worship Him on his Holy mountain in unison.” One of reasons given in rabbinic theodicy for the destruction of the 2nd Temple was not only sinat hinam (baseless hatred) but also that Jewish children in Israel were not learning the aleph bet. Today that risk, is not a reality, and Hebrew is alive and well on the tongues of little children playing in playgrounds games such as “Hide and Seek”, forging a new destiny for the Jewish people, and indeed
by learning Hebrew the student is promised that secrets will not hide from their understanding, “if only they would seek.”

David B levy