

March 9, 2012 Friday 15 Adar1 5772 15:34 IST



Print



Back to original article

THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website



Photo by: Courtesy

Let my people know!

GHIL'AD ZUCKERMANN

09/03/2012

The Hebrew Bible should be taught like a foreign language.

In 1996 president Ezer Weizman visited Cambridge University to see the medieval Cairo Geniza Jewish manuscripts. He was introduced to the regius professor of Hebrew, nominated by the queen of England herself. Hearing "Hebrew," the friendly president clapped the don on the shoulder and asked "ma nishma," the common Israeli "what's up" greeting, which some take to literally mean "what shall we hear" but which is a loan translation of the Yiddish phrase *vos hÅ©rt zikh*, literally meaning "what's heard." To Weizman's astonishment, the distinguished Hebrew professor didn't have the faintest clue about what the president "wanted from his life." As an expert on the Old Testament, he wondered whether Weizman was alluding to Deuteronomy 6:4: *Shema Yisrael* (Hear, O Israel). Not knowing Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Romanian - let alone Israeli, the language spoken by Israelis - the Cantabrigian don had no chance of guessing the actual meaning of this beautiful, economical expression. Semiticist Edward Ullendorff has wrongly claimed that Isaiah could have easily understood Israeli. To begin with, Isaiah would have found it extremely hard to even decode the European pronunciation of Israeli speakers. But more important - and less hypothetical: Do Israelis understand Isaiah? In the last 10 years, I have unfortunately acquired many enemies because I insisted that Israelis not only do not understand the Bible, but much worse: They misunderstand it without even realizing it! Thus, I was delighted to hear about the project launched by the experienced Bible teacher Avraham Ahuvia and insightful publisher Rafi Mozes, acronymized in the biblionym *Tanakh RAM*. WHAT MOST PEOPLE call Modern Hebrew, which I term Israeli, is a fascinating and multifaceted 120 year-old Semito-European hybrid language. It is a mosaic rather than Mosaic. Its grammar is based not only on "sleeping beauty" Hebrew, but also on Yiddish, the revivalists' *mame loshen* (mother tongue), as well as on other languages spoken by the founders, e.g. Polish, Russian, German, Ladino and Arabic. Notwithstanding, the Education Ministry axiomatically assumes that Israeli is simply an evolution of Hebrew and that the Bible is thus written in the very same language spoken by Israeli pupils. Israelis might understand the very basic meaning of *bereshit bara elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'arets* (In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth) rather than, say, *hatzvi yisrael al bamotekha alal* (II Samuel 1:19: The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places). But how many Israelis can really fathom *tohu vavohu* or *tehom* (Genesis 1:2), the Israeli misleading senses being "mess" and "abyss"? How many Israelis know that an *egla meshulleshet* (Genesis 15:9) is not a triangular cow but "a heifer of three years old"? If they studied the RAM Bible, they would know because it is translated as such: *egla bat shalosh*. Most Israelis misunderstand *yeled sha'ashuim* (Jeremiah 31:19) as "playboy" rather than "pleasant child." *Ba'u banim ad mashber* (Isaiah 37:3) is misinterpreted by Israelis as "children arrived at a crisis" rather than as "children arrived at the mouth of the womb, to be born." *Adam l'amal yulad* (Job 5:7) is taken to mean "man was born to do productive work" rather than "mischief" - an accusation of the inherent wickedness of mankind. One could give thousands of examples, and from post-biblical Hebrew too: for instance, how many Israelis can follow the meaning of the Hanukka hymn "*Ma'oz Tzur Yeshu'ati*"? ISRAELIS ARE INCAPABLE of recognizing fine points of aspects and tenses in the Bible. I remember in my IDF basic training, the commander ordered us "*od hamesh dakot hayitem kan!*" (Within five minutes you will have been here), *hayitem* referring to an action in the future. In the Bible, *heyitem* regularly refers to an action that has been completed, independently of whether or not it is in the past or future. Such a biblical mind-set is in strong contradistinction to the *weltanschauung* of the *Homo sapiens sapiens israelicus vulgaris* and to the way Israelis read the Bible. Ask Israelis what *avanim*

sha'agu mayim (Job 14:19) means and they will tell you that the stones eroded the water. On second thought, they might guess that it would make more sense that the water eroded the stones. Yet such an object-verb-subject order is ungrammatical in Israeli today. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda would have been most content had Israelis spoken biblical Hebrew. Had the Hebrew revival been fully successful, we would indeed have spoken a language closer to ancient Hebrew than modern English is to Chaucer because we would have bypassed more than 1,750 years of natural development. Given the Israeli language's hybridic heritage and omnipresent misunderstandings of the Hebrew Bible by Israelis, Ahuvia's translation should be cherished by the establishment. The Education Ministry should revise the way it teaches the Bible and treat it as foreign language classes - just like Latin. *Tanakh RAM* fulfills the mission of *red el ha'am* not only in its Hebrew meaning (go down to the people) but also - more importantly - in its Yiddish meaning (*red* meaning speak). Ahuvia's RAM translation is most useful and dignified. Given its high register, however, I predict that the future promises consequent translations into more colloquial forms of Israeli, a beautifully multilayered and intricately multisourced language of which to be proud. *Prof. Zuckermann splits his time between Israel and Australia. His most recent book Israelit Safa Yafa (Israeli, A Beautiful Language: Hebrew as Myth) was published by Am Oved. www.zuckermann.org*



Print

[Back to original article](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

All rights reserved © 1995 - 2011 The Jerusalem Post.