

Let My People Know!

Towards a Revolution in the Teaching of the Hebrew Bible

by Ghil'ad Zuckermann

In 1996 President Ezer Weizman visited the University of Cambridge to familiarise himself with the famous collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts known as the Cairo *Genizah*. He was introduced to the Regius Professor of Hebrew. Hearing 'Hebrew', the friendly president clapped the don on the shoulder and asked *ma nishma*, the common Israeli 'what's up?' greeting, which is, in fact, a loan translation of the Yiddish phrase *vas hert zikh*, usually pronounced *vsertsekh* and literally meaning 'what's heard?'.

To Weizman's astonishment, the distinguished Hebrew professor did not have the faintest clue whatsoever about what the president 'wanted from his life'. As an expert of the Old Testament, he wondered whether Weizman was alluding to Deuteronomy 6:4: *Shema' Yisra'el* (Hear, O Israel). Knowing neither Yiddish, Russian (*chto slyshno*), Polish (*co slychac*), nor Romanian (*ce se aude*) – let alone Israeli (a.k.a. 'Modern Hebrew') – the Cantabrigian don had no chance whatsoever of guessing the actual meaning of this beautiful, economical expression. Edward Ullendorff, who passed away in 2011, claimed that Isaiah could have easily understood Israeli. I propose that his statement is false – unless of course he referred to Isaiah Leibowitz, yet another prophet. To begin with, Isaiah the Biblical prophet would have found it extremely difficult to even decode the European pronunciation of Israeli speakers. But the more important – and much less hypothetical – question is: Do Israelis understand Isaiah?

Israelis not only do not understand the Hebrew Bible, but much worse: they misunderstand it without even realising it! By and large, Israeli speakers are the worst students in advanced studies of the Bible. I love both Hebrew and Israeli, and in the last 20 years I have argued that the Hebrew Bible ought to be translated into the contemporary language of Israel. Against this background, I was delighted to hear about the recent publication of *Tanakh RAM*.



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Tanakh RAM is the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into Israeli. It is the result of four-years' hard work by the impressively-experienced Bible teacher Avraham Ahuvia, as well as the insightful publisher Rafi Moses, acronymized in the biblionym RAM. Each page in *Tanakh RAM* has two columns: On the right side appears the Hebrew text and on the left side the translation into Israeli. The Israeli translation includes two advantages vis-a-vis the original text: punctuation such as commas, and division into sections with an appropriate title.

Moses contacted Ahuvia in 1999 and the latter completed the work in 2004. Initially, in June 2008, RAM Publishing House (owned by Moses) and Rekhes Publishing House published 14 booklets for primary pupils and high school students. The booklets included specific Biblical chapters according to the national syllabus. In 2010, 2011 and 2012, RAM and Yediot Akharonot publishing houses produced the translation of the Torah, Former Prophets and Latter Prophets respectively.

Harsh opposition has followed. Zvi Zameret, 'til July 2011 head of Israel Education Ministry's pedagogical council, defined *Tanakh RAM* as 'a disaster of Biblical proportions'. Although he admits that 'the Bible teaching situation is deteriorating alarmingly', he focused on financial excuses and declared in a 2011 interview in Haaretz that 'there's an unequivocal order to schools not to use *Tanakh RAM*. We see this rewriting of the Bible as one of the greatest disasters to Bible studies'. Disturbingly, Zameret cited former Education Ministry Director General Shimshon Shoshani as saying 'bring me principals [whose schools use *Tanakh RAM*] and we'll hang them in the city square!' (sic).

Unlike the Hebrew myth that Zameret obviously adheres to, the Israeli language is a fascinating and multifaceted 120 year-old Semito-European hybrid language. It is mosaic rather than only Mosaic. Its grammar is based not only on 'sleeping beauty' Hebrew, but simultaneously also on Yiddish, the revivalists' mother tongue, as well as on a plethora of other languages spoken by the founders of Israeli, e.g. Polish, Russian, German, Ladino and Arabic.

Notwithstanding. Israel's Education Ministry axiomatically assumes that Israeli is simply an organic evolution of Hebrew and that the Bible is thus written in the very same language - albeit in a higher register, of course- spoken by Israeli pupils at primary and secondary schools. Needless to say, the publishers of Hartom-Cassuto and other volumes providing numerous glosses to the unfathomable Biblical verses, have benefited immensely from such conservatism, which might be related to selfrighteousness, hubris or simply blindness on behalf of Israel's educational system.

How many Israelis can really fathom *tohu wavohu* or *tehom* (Genesis 1 :2), the Israeli misleading, wrong senses being 'mess' and 'abyss' respectively? Most Israelis understand *yeled sha'ashu'im* (Jeremiah 31:19, King James 20) as 'playboy' rather than 'pleasant,



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beloved child’. *Ba’u banim ‘ad mashber* (Isaiah 37:3) is interpreted by Israelis as ‘children arrived at a crisis’ rather than as ‘children arrived at the mouth of the womb, to be born’. *Adam le’amal yullad* (Job 5:7) is taken to mean ‘man was born to do productive work’ rather than ‘mischief’ or ‘trouble’ – this sentence stands as an accusation of the inherent wickedness of mankind.

Who knows what *egla meshullesbet* (Genesis 15:9) is?: a triangular heifer? three calves? a third heifer? a cow weighing three weight units? a three-legged heifer? If you studied the RAM Bible, you would know because its translation into Israeli is as *egla bat shalosh* (‘an heifer of three years old’, see also the *King James Version*, which is often more accessible to Israelis than the Hebrew Bible itself).

Tanakh RAM fulfils 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!’, as opposed to its colourful communist sense). Ahuvia’s 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 multi-layered and intricately multi-sourced language, of which to be proud.