

How the Father of Modern Hebrew Helped Fulfill Bible Prophecy

I had the great privilege of knowing Ehud Ben Yehuda as a dear friend when I lived in Jerusalem in the early 1970s. I also knew his younger sister, Dola. Both were in their 70s. They were two of the three living children of Eliezer and his second wife, Hemda. The story of their father's work and mission in life against unthinkable odds is both heartbreaking and heartwarming, and many books have been written about his accomplishments.

My purpose is to describe the struggle this family underwent to raise the Hebrew language from the dead. Their story is a huge life lesson for those called to accomplish something extraordinary. I will present this incredible story in a series over the next few months.

What kind of person does it take to single-handedly resurrect a language which had been dead since the second century A.D.?

It is true that in the 19th century, there were a great many Jews who knew how to *read* the Torah and rabbinical books in Hebrew, or at least mouth the letters in the prayer book—especially in Eastern Europe. The ancient texts were chanted by religious Jews, but for the most part, barely understood. In Jerusalem there were a few Sephardic Jews (from Arab countries) who could even speak some Hebrew, but with a limited ancient vocabulary lacking all modern concepts. No one even considered that Hebrew could be a living language. Not one Jew spoke it as his mother tongue. For all practical purposes, the language was dead.

In the 1880s, there was a babble of many foreign tongues spoken by a grand total of some 30,000 Jews, who had come to

the Holy Land from the four corners of the earth. Simply put, without Eliezer, it is doubtful there would have ever been a revival, literally, a resurrection of spoken Hebrew. Therefore, Eliezer Ben Yehuda bears the title of “The Father of Modern Hebrew” throughout the Jewish world.

Born in Lithuania in 1858, Ben Yehuda, the youngest in his family, learned the Hebrew Scriptures on his father’s knee. He loved spending time with his father, and with a phenomenal mind, at the age of 4, he already knew significant portions of the Torah, the Talmud and commentaries by heart.

But his father had tuberculosis, and one day as he was studying the Torah with his 4-year-old, he suddenly coughed up a huge amount of blood, which covered the Torah page. His last words were, “Eliezer, my son, clean the Torah! Don’t bring dishonor to our sacred book.”

From that time on, the young child was sent to one religious boarding institution after another. He was always the best student wherever he studied. At one academy, his favorite rabbi slipped him a rare book that was not religious, but translated into Hebrew—*Robinson Crusoe*. It was that book that ignited his belief that Hebrew could be a living language once again.

In his memoirs, he wrote: “I fell in love with the Hebrew tongue as a living language. This love was a great and all-consuming fire that the torrent of life could not extinguish—and it was the love of Hebrew that saved me from the danger which awaited me on the next step of my new life.”

That next step came when he was slipped a short volume of Hebrew grammar by his favorite rabbi, who had dared to taste of non-religious books. Of course, his ultra-religious uncle with whom he lived was horrified that his nephew was straying into areas outside rabbinical literature, and in a rage, threw the 14-year-old boy out of his house, telling him never to

return.

A Chance Meeting That Would Change History

Devastated, Eliezer wandered through the night to a nearby town, went into the local synagogue and fell asleep. A Jewish businessman, Solomon Jonas—more secular than traditional—approached him and invited him to his home. Eliezer was immediately drawn to his library, but found he could not understand a single word. The only alphabet he knew was Hebrew. Even his mother tongue, Yiddish, was written with the Hebrew alphabet.

Jonas took him in as a son. Recognizing his brilliant mind, the whole family participated in preparing him for an entrance examination to a state (secular) school, and after that, a university. Jonas' daughter, Devora, was enlisted to teach him Russian and French—required for the state school. He taught himself mathematics and biology by reading books in his newfound languages. He excelled in school and made plans to attend university. Eliezer and Devora kept in touch by mail. Devora saw him as her prince.

Eliezer became very much a secularist, loving the great literary giants in Russian and French. No longer was he interested in Jewish things—except there was one thing he could not let go. He wrote, "That string was my love of the Hebrew language. Even after all things Jewish became foreign to me I could not keep away from the Hebrew tongue."

A New Movement: 'Nationalism'

Among the important events that lit a fire in this visionary was a rising "nationalist" movement among different peoples who wanted their own country. Eliezer saw how the Bulgarians were rebelling against their rulers, the Turkish Ottoman Empire, and he thought, *If the Bulgarians, who are not an ancient, classical people can demand and obtain a state of their own, then the Jews, the "people of the Book" and the*

heirs of historic Jerusalem, deserve the same.

He  In the middle of the night, as he was reading newspapers,
thhe said, "Suddenly, as if lightning struck, an incandescent
enlight radiated before my eyes ... and I heard a strange inner
revoice calling to me: 'The revival of Israel and its language
adon the land of the forefathers!' This was the dream."

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He would go to Paris to study medicine and become a doctor. With that career, he would have a profession to earn a living for himself and his family. He planned to marry Devora, and they would go to live in Jerusalem.

His Catholic Confidant

Thus in 1878, Eliezer began his medical studies at the Sorbonne. He was penniless, but found an attic to rent and ate one meal a day. He spent his days studying in libraries across Paris. Visiting a Russian library, he met a new friend, a Russian/Polish Catholic journalist, Tchatchnikof, who promptly adopted him and opened for him the door to French literary society, introducing him to such literary giants as Victor Hugo.

It was a rare friendship because of the long history of anti-Jewish teachings by the church and state-approved anti-Semitism throughout Europe. Jews associated with Jews. But Tchatchnikof became a bosom friend, coaching him in the art of journalism and also giving Eliezer occasional work to help him support himself. Most interesting, Tchatchnikof began pushing the visionary towards acting on his dream of a Jewish homeland.

The journalist asked his friend, "Are there any other Jews who long to see their national life reborn?" Eliezer's answer was, "All Jews believe they will return to their land when the Messiah comes." But, he added, the educated "enlightened" Jews [who might have the means to do something] tend to assimilate, out of the fold.

The Pole then asked if anyone had ever *published* the idea of Zion returning to its land. Eliezer explained there was a Hebrew periodical called *Hamagid*.

"So, can you write in Hebrew?" When Eliezer admitted he was not sure how good he would be, the Catholic journalist countered, "If you can express yourself in Hebrew, you can write the article. Maybe that is why we have been brought together at this time, in this city which is the center of liberal nationalism."

When Eliezer suggested someone else could do it, Tchatchnikof burst out, "This is childish foolishness! Whoever has the first inspiration must be the one to state the case and get it published. Go to it, and let's have no more argument about it."

Eliezer wrote the article and sent it to *Hamagid*, which turned it down. Despondent, and also realizing his health was deteriorating, he felt that a little light had been lit, and then extinguished. He fell into depression, seeing himself as just another Parisian who succumbed to poverty and ill health.

Hey Friend, Don't Give Up

But Tchatchnikof became angry. "You show none of the hope and resilience that are the hallmarks of the Jews. You cannot give in, and you dare not lose hope. There must be another publication in Hebrew somewhere to which you can send your article," he said. And there was. Eliezer sent his manuscript to *The Dawn*, a Hebrew periodical in Vienna, and his article was accepted for publication.

A few weeks later, Tchatchnikof came to visit his friend and found he had been spitting up blood. He had contracted tuberculosis, very possibly years before from his father.

✖ Eliezer told his journalist friend, "Too bad! I have just received a letter from *The Dawn's* publisher, who stated, 'I was very pleased with your article, and I am sure that you are destined for great achievements.'" "But," said Eliezer, "it is too late. I am spitting up blood—a sure sign of tuberculosis."

Instead of sympathy, Tchatchnikof went into a rage. "Did you go to a doctor? Are you sure it is tuberculosis—and do you know for a fact that it is fatal?" The Polish journalist took him to his own doctor, who sent him to a specialist. The diagnosis was that Eliezer had six months to live.

"Well, that's that—I will die in six months." Again, Tchatchnikof was furious. "You must not die," he declared. "Too many liberation movements were stillborn because their creator failed to insure his own survival."

He reminded Eliezer of the great Jewish philanthropist, Baron Edmond Rothschild, who helped Jews in need. Eliezer was hesitant to ask for help, but the journalist himself petitioned Rothschild, who sent the sick man to his hospital in the warm city of Algiers. He recovered his strength and began writing more articles.

Tchatchnikof came to visit him in Algiers, and Eliezer read

him his third article. Here are a few lines:

Let us therefore, revive the language and plant it in the mouths of our youths and they will never betray it—but we shall not be able to revive the Hebrew language except in the land where the Hebrews form a majority of the inhabitants. Let us therefore, increase the number of Jews in our desolate land; let us return the remnant of our people to the land of their forefathers; let us bring back to life the nation—and the language will live, too!

If we revive the nation and return it to its land—the Hebrew shall live, too! For in the end, this is the only path to final redemption—and without that redemption we are lost, lost forever.

Tchatchnikof exclaimed: “Eliezer, what a shame you are not a Polish Catholic! You could become the youngest saint of our people ... I hope your people will realize what words of prophecy you are uttering. In your voice, I hear Jeremiah and Amos, Isaiah and Ezekiel. I have never felt one way or another about the Jews—but now I know that the seed of the prophets is still alive. Your people shall know the redemption you talk of—and you shall be known as a prophet of that redemption.”

Eliezer won another influential ally—Peretz Smolenskin, the author and publisher of *The Dawn*. After reading the logic and the passion in Ben Yehuda’s articles and then watching in horror the terrible pogroms in Russia, he realized the only answer was a land and a language that belonged to the Jewish people.

Back in Paris, Eliezer prepared to leave for Jerusalem. “It would be the height of hypocrisy for me to call my people to return to their desolate land while I myself stay in Paris.” Tchatchnikof encouraged him and even gave him money to make the trip to the Holy Land.

Sadly, Eliezer knew he must terminate his relationship with Devora Jonas, the love of his life. As a man with tuberculosis, he might die at any time, or worse, pass the disease onto a wife. Anyway, he would not be able to support a wife and family.

He wrote a letter to Solomon Jonas, Devora's father, and explained that though for years he had planned to marry Devora, he now released her because of his sickness. He also explained that he was leaving to live in Jerusalem. He wrote, "I do not know what I shall do when I get to the Holy Land—I only know that I must go there."

He continued,

I have no choice but to terminate my promise to your daughter. Please believe me, sir; I am not doing this out of baseness. I have not fallen out of love with her. She is still very much in my heart—but I can no longer offer her anything! I cannot promise her a home and a family. Nor can I offer her a long marriage. Indeed, if she marries me, my doctors inform me, she may fall victim to this cursed illness of mine. Please sir, in your kindness, act as my messenger and convince your dear daughter that she must forget me and find another, more worthy man to love and marry. I shall pray that she is happy. Believe me, sir; she is better off without me.

The story will continue.

**I have leaned heavily for source material from Fulfillment of Prophecy, The Life Story of Eliezer Ben Yehuda 1858-1922, as it is written by Eliezer Ben Yehuda, grandson of the Eliezer Ben Yehuda, because he received firsthand information in great detail from his grandmother, Hemda Ben Yehuda. {eo}*

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