

Azila Talit Reisenberger

Validation through Hebrew Literature*

A B S T R A C T This paper deals with the selection of teaching material at school-leaving and tertiary levels in Hebrew learning institutes outside of the state of Israel. It proposes that, in addition to the core teaching material that is Israeli literature, one should include a sample of local works, as these are of great benefit in validating the students' lives as well as the viability of Hebrew language and literature. Such material, written in Hebrew, yet portraying familiar existence, interlinks various aspects of students' identity – such as their religious or ideological affiliation, together with their domestic life experience – with the Hebrew language. Furthermore, the paper suggests that personal validation through this particular study material may attract students to researching this field and lure them to produce similar works if they have the literary inclination.

Keywords: Hebrew language, Hebrew literature, validation, viability, interest

1. Selection of material

Outside of the state of Israel, Hebrew language and literature at matriculation level or in tertiary institutes is usually taught as an optional subject. The educational bodies selecting this option and initiating Hebrew studies usually do so to fulfil a particular need; consequently they govern the strand of Hebrew they want to employ and the content of the teaching material - two aspects that are interlinked and impact on each other. The choice of linguistic strand – biblical, Mishnaic or modern Hebrew – of itself narrows the choice of material. Thus religious institutions such as Yeshivahs will generally keep away from modern material as their students are engaged mostly with religious texts, while secular schools and universities may tend to concentrate on contemporary texts – unless they teach a specific module that reflects other designated topics, such as 'Biblical Hebrew', etc.

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However, it is necessary to point out that the selection of teaching material is governed by a variety of methodological issues, and is dictated not only by the educators' ideologies. It is influenced also by the students' expectations (Morahg, 1993: 189)². These two are not always in concurrence, which may bring either tension and frustration to the classroom, or avoidance of the subject. As students vote with their feet – steering clear of Hebrew courses, not registering for, or deregistering from, Hebrew courses – this may bring about the decline of Hebrew teaching at a higher level (Band, 1993; Morahg, 1993; Jacobson, 1993; Raphaeli, 1993).

As a result of my experience in teaching Hebrew literature in South Africa, and reviews of a book introducing South African Hebrew texts to higher grade students³, this paper proposes that texts reflecting local experience are invaluable material for strengthening the bonds between the students, the Hebrew language, their Jewish identity, and their families. I believe that when students are able to identify with elements in the texts it augments their pride in their cultural heritage reflected in the texts. It also strengthens their attachment to this very heritage through engagement with it in Hebrew – a linguistic involvement which, in itself, makes a statement about their affiliation.

Therefore I maintain that introducing a module of locally written literature in addition to the core texts – which in the main are Israeli literature – is invaluable.

2. Source material

Few will contest the assertion that, while currently there is vibrant literature in Israel, the Hebrew literature written in the Diaspora does not measure up to it either in quantity or (in many cases) in quality⁴. But this may not have been the case in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. At that time the *Yishuv* in Israel was meagre and consisted mostly of *Halutzim*, who may have concentrated on settling in the land rather than developing its literary corpus (Mintz, 1993: 15)⁵.

At the same time many immigrants, who left the cultural centre of Eastern Europe for other destinations such as the UK, the USA and South Africa, brought the ethos of Hebrew culture with them to the new countries. When *Ahad Ha'am* publicised his theory about the revival and development of Hebrew culture, it gave a boost to all Jewish intellectuals and Hebraists in the new world. Community leaders and educationalists were enthused by *Ahad Ha'am*'s conviction that creating a modern Hebrew culture not limited to Israel but all around the world, is not only necessary but desirable for its prosperity. Schools were established, courses were developed, teachers were trained, and a variety of Hebrew material was published. Hebrew publications took different forms: there were Hebrew periodicals that published current affairs side by side with literary texts; prose and poetry were printed in book form; and plays were written and

2 Other variants enter the process of selecting teaching material, sometimes methodologically far removed from pedagogy, such as temporal political grudges, etc (Elazar 1993: 132-135), but this paper does not deal with these issues.

3 I use the term 'higher grade students' to refer to students who are in their matric year and to students studying Hebrew at tertiary institutions.

4 Though a lot of praise has recently been heaped on Hebrew literature written in the Diaspora; see Aaron Amir's review of Lev-Ziv (2006), or recent books by Reisenberger in South Africa (2004) and Maya Arad in the USA (2006).

5 Tina Levitan does not agree with this assertion; see Levitan 1980: 310-322.

performed (Mintz, 1993: 14-15; Levitan, 1980; Kabakoff, 1990; Reisenberger, 2000a; 2000b).

Authors in the Diaspora were not sure whether to describe their life-experience and reality, or to follow Bialik's school and record the inner world as a reflection of the national. This dilemma grew when Diaspora authors felt that the *Eretz Yisrael* literary circle would have preferred them to concentrate on their own reality. It was particularly noticeable with regard to the question of Americanism (Govrin 1988), but it also applies to the situation in South Africa.

The contributors themselves were vacillating between depiction of their 'here and now', trying to give meaning to their experience as immigrants in a new land – which may have helped them to cope with difficult situations – and their wish to be part of the 'grand picture' by dwelling on national sentiments. The periodicals at the time attest to this indecisiveness (Reisenberger, 2000a; 2000b). In early Hebrew publications in the Diaspora one finds works that reflect Jewish national idealism side by side with works that deal with themes inspired by the historical heritage of local people in the new land. One of the most famous poems of the latter variety is *Mul Ohel Timmmurah* by the American Hebraist, BN Silkiner – an extensive poetic work (nearly 100 pages long) that was inspired by, and devoted to, the American past.

3. Production of Hebrew literature in the Diaspora

The interest in the preservation of Hebrew, and the desire for continuity, can be gleaned from the establishment of Hebrew associations⁶, Hebrew publishing houses, Hebrew journals published on a regular basis, or occasional publications such as literary works of individual authors or anthologies (Kabakoff, 1990: 98-9). It is also evident in the effort and financial commitment invested in all these ventures, in the energetic promotion of visits of important Hebrew personalities (such as Bialik), and in the attempts to establish a link between Hebraists in various parts of the world⁷.

There are many stories attesting to the total dedication of some of these early Hebraists. We know of those who went hungry in order to keep the Hebrew journals going, or fell ill as a result of their turbulent battle to realise their life's mission – people such as Mr Rubik who edited the Hebrew monthly *Barkai* in South Africa till his death (Reisenberger, 2000a; 2000b). Then there are those who preferred to suffer discomfort in order to save the money needed for the promotion of Hebrew publications, such as the effort of the American poet for the publication of *Senunit*, the first Hebrew anthology in the USA. In his memoirs Lisitzky describes how he walked to work every day in order to save the fare towards his share of the cost of publication (Kabakoff, 1990: 99).

4. Impact of time on Hebrew writings in the Diaspora

The enthusiasm of the newcomers, and their commitment, was not a guarantee for success. It took a lot of perseverance, group effort and camaraderie to ensure that the dream would actually be realised. They established societies with the objective of keeping Hebrew literature alive, and their fervent determination and personal association brought about many publications, some of literary merit, and some of more popular appeal.

⁶ In the USA, for example, we find the establishment of Hebrew speaking societies such as *Mefitze Sefat Ever, Ivriah*.

⁷ For a comprehensive study of the subject see Pelli's book on the *Tarbut Ivrit* in the USA throughout the 20th century (1998).

The uneven standard and the diverse target readership may at times have impacted negatively on each other, as the small target readership was saturated. An example of this is the way that *Kadimah*, the series of popular paperbacks initiated by the *Histadrut Ivrit* in the USA, took over – probably one of the contributing factors for the demise of the Asaf publishing agency which, until then, had brought to light many prestigious publications, but had to cancel its later plans such as the 60th jubilee volume to honour *Ahad Ha'am*, etc (Kabakoff, 1990: 101).

The enthusiasm of the newcomers was met, in many instances, by a patronising attitude on the part of the more established settlers who sometimes turned to satire or parody in order to describe the newcomers' way of life⁸ (Kabakoff 1990:98). Furthermore, while they may have grown up in an environment where excellence of Hebrew was an ethos⁹, with the passage of time their own proficiency may have declined, and the skills of the subsequent generation of writers did not match up.

5. Standard of Hebrew and literary merit

Much has been said about the standard of Hebrew and the literary merit of Hebrew literature written in the Diaspora. Haim Brenner, who kept abreast of Hebrew publication in America, for example, commended the endeavour to keep up the Hebrew culture, yet published a scathing attack on the uninspiring character of the publications, on the deluge of words with little content, on the self-centredness (i.e. *Americanism*) of the authors, and the low standard of the material. His denigration of the literary merit can be gleaned from comments he made, such as: "There isn't a single well-wrought poem in the entire volume", "rather cumbersome language ... of the poets", etc (Brenner, 1960, as in Spicehandler, 1993: 98). However, things are different in the 21st century. Literary critics recognise the significant contribution of the Diaspora Hebrew literature to current Hebrew culture and literature (Amir, 2006: 2).

6. South African writings

The Hebrew literature published in South Africa in the first two-thirds of the 20th century displays the same shortcomings as its American counterpart – though, unlike Brenner, I prefer to emphasise and praise the attempt of the writers to immortalise in print their life-experience in the new land. Attempts to perceive and structure personal experience in times when there is a clear gap between life as it should be and life as it is, often trigger the artistic impulse to recreate reality itself in order to feel in control of one's life (Sherman, 1987: 10). The Jewish immigrants to South Africa, like many immigrants the world over, attempted to reconcile their expectations and their realities in their writing, and this brought about the creation of a body of invaluable Hebrew (and Yiddish) literary works which keep on record their unique experience. Their bitter-sweet depiction of the special peculiarities of the new land provides such a valuable glimpse into a particular time and place that I believe it counterbalances their linguistic shortcomings and, to some extent, even their deficiencies in literary talent.

7. Current situation

Since 1948 the State of Israel has replaced the Hebrew language as the symbol of Jewish

⁸ See for example Gerson Rosenzweig's celebrated parody: *Talmud Yankai*.

⁹ We know that many Jewish schools in Eastern Europe were teaching all their subjects in Hebrew; and therefore immigrants from Eastern Europe to other places in the world brought with them a love of Hebrew as well as mastery of and proficiency in it.

identification for Diaspora Jewry. Before 1948 secular Jews who wanted to prove as well as improve their Jewish identity learned to speak Hebrew¹⁰. But since the establishment of the State of Israel, identity became more physical, by attachment to the Holy Land. And in the past six decades more Diaspora Jews have been travelling to Israel than learning Hebrew. Flying over to Israel, is quicker and requires less effort than learning Hebrew of a standard that enables one to understand, read and write. Thus the number of learners of Hebrew language and literature in the Diaspora has declined dramatically, with a consequent shrinking of the pool of writers.

In the second half of the 20th century when, through the advent of modern travel, some Hebrew native speakers emigrated to foreign countries, they did not publish Hebrew literature. If any talented writer living outside of Israel felt the compulsion to write, he or she published in Israel, concentrated on universal themes, and tried to avoid making reference to locality¹¹. This was a result of a particular patriotic sentiment that was palpable at the time in Israel.

In the 1970s and 1980s, leaving Israel was seen in a particularly negative light. A derogatory term, *Yordim*, was used to denote such emigrants. The word *Yordim* – which literally means 'descending' – was used with the particular connotation of 'going down' not as a physical act, but rather to express a negative sentiment such as 'drop out'¹². Esteemed leaders such as Itzhak Rabin called the emigrants *Nefolet Nemoshot*, which means 'drop-outs without backbone'. It is no wonder, then, that even the talented writers amongst the emigrants kept a low-profile at the time. On the whole they knew that if they discussed their locality they would not be published in Israel, and as there was no meaningful Hebrew publishing industry outside of the state of Israel, Hebrew literature in the Diaspora virtually ceased to exist. And if, as mentioned above, writers insisted on creating Hebrew literature in the Diaspora, they did not reflect on their whereabouts. Thus we have no meaningful Hebrew literary records of Diaspora life in the second half of the 20th century.

With globalisation and flux of movement, together with the growth of Israel into a normal modern state rather than a realization of a two millennia dream, this attitude has dissipated. Currently, at the beginning of the 21st century, the situation is different. Hebrew literature in the Diaspora is thriving. Creative writing groups have been established¹³, sections of local newspapers are dedicated to local Hebrew literature¹⁴, Internet Hebrew groups have been formed¹⁵, and authors have published Hebrew books that depict life outside of Israel. Suddenly we hear of the life experience of Israelis in the USA (Lev-Ziv, 2006), or we hear about general

¹⁰ Observant Jews bolstered their Jewish identity by keeping the *Mitzvot* more zealously.

¹¹ See for example all the Hebrew poetry books of Israel ben-Yosef who lived in South Africa, but published his 'universal' poetry in Israel.

¹² The word was a counterpart to the term *Olym* which literally means 'these who go up', and is given to the people who immigrate to Israel. Since geographically, Israel is not higher than other countries, it is a clear indication of how immigration into Israel has been seen in a positive light, conceptualised as going up, while emigrating out of Israel has been seen in a negative light and conceptualised as going down.

¹³ See for example Ruth Artman-Breindler efforts in California with the literary publication in Hebrew: *Bama*. From my personal correspondence with Ruth Artman-Breindler, it became clear that there are numerous creative writing groups of Hebrew speakers in the USA.

¹⁴ For example *Shalom L.A.*

¹⁵ For example Ilan Weiss's Internet group from Berlin; contactable at the organiser's personal email address versicherung.weiss@gmx.de

life in the USA (Arad 2006), and about post-Apartheid life in Cape Town, South Africa (Reisenberger, 2004)¹⁶.

8. Teaching local texts

Since students' choice to participate in Hebrew courses in the Diaspora testifies usually to their identity affiliation rather than to their linguistic talent, the choice of material has to be considered carefully. If their expectations are not met, there is an increase in the frustration level in class as well as in the drop-out rate. Side by side with material designed to improve their language skills, we need literary texts that hold students' attention. In this regard it is crucial that the texts have appropriate subject matter. I propose that the selection should include texts written in the country of the students' domicile.

If the topics of the stories they read are valid, then their own lives seem to be validated. If Hebrew literature is "*lo bashamayi*" and not only in the Holy Land but in familiar places as well, then they can personally be actively part of it.

To date most Hebrew literature taught in tertiary institutes in the Diaspora deals with Israeli issues. I believe that we need to change the situation by adding some local literature. The constant depiction of a far-away place, as much as they love that place, distances Hebrew, and marks the language as "Other"¹⁷.

9. Local Hebrew literature marks Hebrew as a major component in Jewish identity

Teaching Hebrew texts reflecting the students' own experience – wherever they live in the world – gives them a particular in-group identity, connecting their lives, as it does, with the Hebrew language which is associated with the Jewish people. It promotes the recognition that Jewish people are not only a loose group of individuals who happen to share a religious belief, but also a people of distinct cultural heritage, with ties to their ancestral land and particular historical ties to the Hebrew language (Morahg, 1993: 189). However, it also implies that, wherever they are, their lives are a worthwhile subject of literature, recorded for posterity.

10. Hebrew as a viable language and thus a viable course at university

The fact that characters in the tales converse in Hebrew while they travel in the little Karoo in South Africa, or on the Prairies in the USA, for example, stresses the idea that Hebrew is neither exclusively for Israelis in Israel, nor a remote and exotic language in the Diaspora where students have encountered it only in the contrived environment of a classroom. Protagonists communicating in Hebrew in a place that is familiar to the students, position the Hebrew language as a viable spoken language within their own reach and makes it more natural for them to speak it themselves.

¹⁶ There are many more examples, including a volume of the literary journal *Psefas* which is dedicated to Hebrew literature written outside of Israel (*Psefas* 2007).

¹⁷ Ruth Raphaeli, for example, decries the decline of Hebrew in America and suggests remedies through changes in the curricula (Raphaeli, 1993: 251-261).

11. Literary texts reflecting ordinary people rather than community leaders

Affiliation to Israel is good and should be encouraged, but being Jewish does not depend solely on contact with the Holy Land. The Jewish protagonists in the local works that students read live like them in the Diaspora, yet their Jewish identity is beyond doubt. The heightened identity of the protagonists allows students to acknowledge that they are in a similar position: they live outside Israel, they may even be assimilated to various degrees, their Hebrew linguistic skill may perhaps not be what it should be, their religious practices may be wanting, but in that the protagonists in the stories are recognised as Jewish beyond a shadow of doubt, they feel better about their own very similar situation.

Since the Jewish press usually focuses on special events and outstanding leaders, the recognition of literary heroes (or anti-heroes) as significant members of the 'in-group' is important to modern Jewish students taking Hebrew language and literature courses at tertiary institutes. Most of our students cannot (yet?) – or do not want to – match exceptional leaders, so their way to find, or identify with, role models in print is not in the press but rather within the body of locally written literature. Furthermore, the press usually stresses great virtues and great piety rather than the human aspects of the characters described. This in itself alienates the young generation who do not always identify with the great luminaries. Literary characters who lead lives similar to their own have a greater attraction. Jewish characters who struggle with their 'Jewishness' on the one hand, and who face the difficulties in the particular country where the students live on the other, validate the students' existence.

12. Importance of texts, even those describing dated experience

There is no debate about the fact that current local texts resonate with students' life experience and validate it. But questions arise as to the value of earlier texts written by the early immigrants. Should one discard these texts altogether or can they also be valuable teaching material?

As we have seen above, the immigrants' experience was a major source of creativity and is recorded in many literary works. Yet, in most cases, current Hebrew students in either South Africa or the USA¹⁸ are not immigrants, which may raise the question: can the students then identify with the protagonists and their life experience?

I concur that some experiences may date a story: immigrants' narrative may not resonate with the third generation in any particular country, yet the domestic description may well raise the students' sense of recognition. Furthermore, I believe that reading stories depicting the immigrants' difficulties may send the students to the older members of their families to inquire after their personal experience. I believe that this may have an enormous impact on relationships with the older, and usually abandoned, generation. Thus, in a roundabout way, not only are the students' lives validated, but their families' history is validated and the act of reading this literature may promote the sharing of data and the passing on, and preserving, of personal history from generation to generation.

13. Curiosity as a source of generating and promoting research

Raising levels of curiosity and the desire to inquire further into personal, familial and communal

¹⁸ These two particular countries are at the heart of this current research, but I believe that the principles stated in this paper apply to other countries in the Diaspora as well.

experience may generate interest in the field, and promote engagement in research in Jewish studies and Hebrew literature in general, and – more likely – in the local community in particular. Putting a place 'on a map' by recording its domestic life may encourage students to value their contemporary experience and put it on record, either through research or through artistic creation. Reading about the lives of local people, whose life experience resonates with the students' or their families' own experience, even though they may have not been recognised community leaders or heroes, may draw their attention to the power of the written word, and may trigger their own need to put their lives on record.

14. Two case studies

14.1 Earlier texts

Through my research on Hebrew literature written in South Africa, I have become familiar with the writing of Zalman Aaron Lison. His stories stood out in the *Barkaai*, the Hebrew journal published in South Africa from 1933-1970. Lison's Hebrew was good and his stories flowed and were engaging – his aesthetic skills and the stories' literary merit were beyond doubt.

As a result of some detective work, I discovered that after his death his family published a selection of his stories in book form. I chose two of these stories and, with permission from the family, I introduced them into the syllabi of higher grade students in South Africa. This in turn required some preliminary work by way of printing the stories and preparing accompanying material, such as literary analysis of the stories for teachers and more experienced students who are able to read literary analysis in Hebrew, as well as background articles in English for the students to read by themselves. All this was done and published together in the form of a book entitled *Pride in Tradition through Acceptance: Jewish Identity in South Africa as reflected in the stories of Zalman A. Lison* (Reisenberger, 2005).

One of the stories, *Darga Basulam*, describes the relationship between a Jewish smous¹⁹ and a Boer farmer. The unravelling narrative depicts the torturous lives of the immigrants as well as the relationship between the Jewish country folk and the Afrikaans farmers. From a Jewish point of view, the story highlights (amongst others) the following themes:

1. The importance of Jewish names
2. Specific beliefs and traditions related to death
3. Mixed marriages
4. The importance of the community.

14.1.2 Ways in which students' lives can be validated

In many cases, students reading *Darga Basulam* have families who came as immigrants and led a life similar to the one described in the story. This sensitises students to their grandparents' difficulties. The story depicts a protagonist who is involved in a mixed marriage. This validates their own or a friend's situation – a familiar problematic issue causing grief in many families.

The story also depicts many Jewish customs and rituals that have to do with death. This may be an excellent way to teach these customs to students alienated by overpowering religious teachers who currently teach these topics in their Jewish daily schools.

¹⁹ Smous is the local South African term for peddler. Peddling was the most common profession amongst the early Jewish immigrants to South Africa.

The story also illustrates the importance of a Hebrew/Jewish name. This may encourage the students to familiarise themselves with their own given names or, in their absence, to choose a name, and be proud of it.

14.1.3 Problems

During interviews with two Heads of Department from Herzlia, the Hebrew day school in Cape Town, one of the teachers expressed the following reservations concerning the teaching of this particular story (which may apply to other locally written Hebrew literature):

- a. Some students don't have, don't know or don't care about, Hebrew names.
- b. Some students suffer as a result of a mixed marriage, and dealing with it as a literary theme may upset them.
- c. Ten years after the dismantling of the Apartheid political system, glorifying the Boer farmers may not be politically correct.

These may be valid points, but I believe that these precise issues are there to raise a discussion in class, especially with students at a tertiary level.

14.2 Current texts

In 2004 an advanced Hebrew class at the University of Cape Town read the story, *Kulam Beseder*, from the collection *Mipo ad Cape Ha'Tikva Ha'Tova* (Reisenberger, 2004). The story depicts the life of a Jewish family in Cape Town. It describes their relationship with their African domestic worker, and relationships between themselves. It deals with prejudices, fear and reconciliation, while Cape Town, with its beauty and its daily life, provides a back-drop to the dramatic events.

In the evaluation forms submitted at the end of the course, many students remarked that it was the best story they had read in their two years of studying Hebrew at university. There is no doubt in my mind that these remarks did not mean to slight the talents of Amos Oz or Savyon Liebrecht, but rather echoed the elation they felt when Hebrew literary texts validated their own lives²⁰.

15. Conclusion

Hebrew literature that depicts circumstances similar to students' life experience validates their existence. It may bring them closer to their families and the community. Above all, since the protagonists speak Hebrew, portrayed as a viable spoken language – a core issue which we want the students to perceive as a given – students accept that Hebrew is "*lo bashamayim*", "nor in the Holy Land alone", but a viable language in familiar places. They can, therefore, be personally actively part of it: speak it, study it, perhaps research it and, if talented, even write literature in it.

²⁰ Subsequently two students decided to continue their Hebrew studies and register for postgraduate courses.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Azila Talit Reisenberger
Hebrew Section
School of Languages and Literatures
University of Cape Town
Email: Azila.Reisenberger@uct.ac.za