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Biblical and Mishnaic Elements in Contemporary Hebrew

The discussion on normative standards for contemporary Hebrew, as presented in Z. Ben-Hayyim's "An Ancient Language in a New Reality" (1953), is based on two assumptions considered self-evident: 1. that before its Revival as a spoken language, Hebrew was "a dead language", and the Revival was that of its forms from before it died ca. 200 C.E.; 2. that it continues both of the living forms of Hebrew — Biblical Hebrew (= B.H.) and Mishnaic Hebrew (M.H.).

However, these two ancient language-forms, as seen by those who make the standards, are not identical with B.H. and M.H. as they really were at their time. The corpuses have reached us overlaid with features of much later periods, and each corpus includes texts written long after the form in question ceased to be spoken. They overlap in time, and contain so many common elements that we ought to speak of three groups of linguistic facts: B.H., M.H. and what is common to both. The linguistic analysis by which rules and words from B.H. and M.H. entered the revived Hebrew, is now antiquated, but cannot be revised now without disruption.

In effect, Hebrew was never dead. It was alive as a written language in a diglossia, and the idea that it was "dead" derives from modern ideologies generated by the rise of European vernaculars in the last few centuries. Nor was it revived from either B.H. or M.H., but from a fusion of both, deriving from the Mishnaic period and since then in almost constant use, simultaneously with artistic uses of B.H. Mendele Mokher Sefarim, in 1884, did not create a "synthetic" language out of B.H. and M.H., but relinquished the biblicalizing style

of the Haskalah and returned to what was even then the language written by the majority of traditional Jewry.

We can still base our normative standards upon B.H. and M.H. as prestige stages in the development of Hebrew, but must do so on a more realistic theoretical basis.