

## PART FOUR

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### Revolutionary Alternatives Zionism and Communism, 1880–1932

#### The Birth of a Language

##### Or the Man Who Loved Hebrew

YVONNE KOZLOVSKY GOLAN

*The Wordmaker* [Ish She'Ahav B'Ivrit],  
directed by Eli Cohen [NCJF]  
Israel, 1991

In Israel during the 1990s, very few producers were willing to risk making a high-budget film for a limited audience without government subsidization. The director Eli Cohen was an exception. He and his crew succeeded in filming an excellent movie that compressed the biography of the so-called father of modern Hebrew, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, into one and a half hours. Produced for the Israel Broadcasting Authority at a total cost of \$200,000, the director used cinematic shorthand and extremely original artistic manipulations of backdrops for his film.

*The Wordmaker* was shot entirely in Israel, in an old hangar that was formerly the British Customs House. The café scenes were filmed in Jaffa, while the meeting in Vienna was filmed in the Railroad Museum, in Haifa. Scenes set in Jerusalem were filmed in the ancient alleys of Ramleh and Lod, which resemble the streets of Ottoman Jerusalem. Adhering closely to the reality of Ben-Yehuda's era, the actors speak English, French,

Russian, and Hebrew, emphasizing their origins and cultural contradictions.

The man who was born Eliezer Perlman Elianov renamed himself Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, meaning the son of Judah. He revived the Hebrew language from a “dead” language, preserved only in the Jewish Bible and prayers, and transformed it into the spoken language of daily life of the Jews who lived in Palestine. The film depicts him as a man of fiery temperament motivated by a burning passion. Despite his long struggle with tuberculosis, he persistently devoted not only his life to this cause, but the lives of his family as well. He attempted to restore to the Jewish people its language, the third element of its nationhood along with the Land of Israel and a shared history of nearly four millennia. Ben-Yehuda will forever be remembered for authoring the first Hebrew dictionary after approximately two thousand years of Jewish exile. To do so, he coined new words to expand the language's vocabulary. He is known as “the first Hebrew teacher” (although of course others taught Hebrew) for reviving the Hebrew language.

Eli Cohen begins his film during World War I, when Ben-Yehuda was living in New York City for economic and security reasons. The story moves back and forth in time to depict the past and show its impact on his later decisions. The supporting actors play the people on whom



Sinai Peter (as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda) plays the father of modern Hebrew. From *The Wordmaker* (1991), directed by Eli Cohen. BELFILMS AND M. SLONIM PRODUCTIONS/NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH FILM

Ben-Yehuda depended financially and morally throughout his life. Because they believed in his mission, they stood by him in times of distress, despite pressures that almost cost some of his relatives their lives.

When Ben-Yehuda arrived in Eretz Israel in 1881, it was ruled by the Ottoman Turks, whose corrupt empire was sometimes called the “Sick Man of the Bosphorus.” The Turkish authorities set up obstacles to Jewish settlement, in the hope of discouraging it. Above all, the regime placed numerous restrictions against any expression of nationalism by minorities throughout the Ottoman Empire, and particularly in the *sanjak*, or district, of Jerusalem. The Jews in Eretz Israel were mostly concentrated in very old commu-

nities in the four holy cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias, called the Old Yishuv. This name, meaning the old settlement, was coined by Ben-Yehuda for his newspaper articles, to contrast it with the New Yishuv.

The Old Yishuv was divided into two major groups: Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardic Jews, from the old Hebrew words for Germany and Spain, respectively. The Ashkenazim originated in countries that were part of the old Germanic empire, while the Sephardim were from countries under Spanish-Portuguese domination and in the Balkans. The Ashkenazim spoke mostly Yiddish as well as local languages, primarily Russian and Romanian, while the Sephardim spoke Ladino (a hybrid of Hebrew and Spanish) and Arabic. The

Ashkenazi Jews did not work for their livelihood. They did not engage in small businesses or agriculture, but mostly studied in yeshivas, institutes of Jewish learning, supported by the *halukah*, literally “distribution,” of charitable funds raised from Jews abroad to support the Jewish residents of Eretz Israel. The Sephardic Jews were wealthier and believed in working for a living as well as engaging in Torah learning. Each group had its own chief rabbis representing it, based on the members’ various geographical origins.

A new wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in Ottoman Eretz Israel between 1885 and 1904 in what was to be called the First Aliyah, or ascent to the Holy Land, following the outbreaks of pogroms and increased anti-Semitic discrimination in Russia’s Jewish Pale of Settlement. These were the Biluim, activist Jewish pioneers who were sick of life in the Diaspora and wished to begin new lives in their ancestral homeland. Their ambition was to work the soil and settle in Eretz Israel, but most if not all were supported financially by Baron Edmond de Rothschild and later by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, too. The relations between the new immigrants—pioneers for whom agricultural work was a priority—and the members of the Old Yishuv were sometimes tense. Although they observed Jewish rituals, the newcomers’ commitment to tilling the soil rather than studying Torah and Talmud seemed like a rejection of Judaism to the old-timers.

Ben-Yehuda arrived in the midst of this political and social unrest with the goal of creating revolutionary change in the community’s cultural and social fabric. Aided by a handful of supporters from the Old Yishuv, he was backed up by people from the New Yishuv who eagerly embraced their identity as “New Jews” with a language of their own. Between 1905 and 1914, a second wave of Jewish settlers immigrated to Ot-

toman Eretz Israel. Unlike their predecessors, they were “barefoot peasants,” secularist thinkers, and ideologues intent on redeeming the land through their own labor. They avoided settling in the four holy cities or in colonies supported by Baron Rothschild. Espousing a synthesis of Marxism and Zionism, they founded the first agricultural collectives. They spoke Hebrew and developed their own defense force.

Ben-Yehuda’s great-grandson provided most of the details for the screenplay, which was based on Ben-Yehuda’s biography. This chapter examines the filmmaker’s selection from Ben-Yehuda’s overall legacy, and discusses whether the film succeeded in challenging and expanding Israel’s collective image of him.

The first scene opens in Ben-Yehuda’s apartment in New York City, where he and his family had been living for about three years, financially supported by wealthy Jewish patrons under the auspices of the World Zionist Organization. Hemda Ben-Yehuda, Eliezer’s second wife and the younger sister of his first wife, Devorah, had convinced her husband to move there from Jerusalem when World War I began.

It is November 1, 1917, the eve of the Balfour Declaration. Ben-Yehuda’s visitors are Nissim Bachar, a wealthy donor by name of Weintraub (a fictitious character), and a Catholic priest (played by Kevin Patterson). The purpose of the evening is to raise donations so that Ben-Yehuda could complete the fifth volume of his *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language, Ancient and Modern*. He is late for the meeting, and the group awaits him in the living room.

In the film as in Ben-Yehuda’s life, Nissim Bachar played a very significant role, and the director has placed him at most of the important milestones of Ben-Yehuda’s life, despite presenting him one-dimensionally and focusing entirely

on Ben-Yehuda's work as a linguist. Bachar was a French Sephardic Jew who was born in Jerusalem and appointed by the Alliance Israelite to build a school in Jerusalem to teach French culture, thereby raising the educational level of Jewish Jerusalemites. The school, called Torah Ume-lacha, taught both Jewish studies and labor. Bachar met Ben-Yehuda and became enchanted with his ideas. However, Ben-Yehuda's financial situation in Eretz Israel was extremely poor. He could not support his family on his salary as an assistant editor of a Hebrew newspaper. Thus, Bachar offered him a job teaching at his new school, albeit at a very low salary. Ben-Yehuda actually taught there for only a year, but he earned the reputation as the first Hebrew teacher because he allowed only Hebrew to be spoken in his class and forbade his students to speak the languages they used at home. Ben-Yehuda transformed Hebrew from a sacred "Sabbath language" used only for prayer and study into a weekday language. During his tenure at the school, Ben-Yehuda and David Yellin developed a curriculum for teaching Hebrew.

The film depicts Ben-Yehuda's work as a teacher in a very short scene that condenses two important pieces of information: first, his work as a teacher, and second, the ridicule his eldest son Ben-Zion (who later changed his name to Itamar Ben-Avi) suffered from the other students for being "the first Hebrew child." This did not really happen since Ben-Zion/Itamar was not of school age during the year that Ben-Yehuda taught at his school. However, it is a cinematic shortcut intended to cover two overlapping dimensions of the school. The conflict between father and son appears later in the film, when Itamar accuses his father of subjecting him to a traumatic pedagogical experiment by forbidding him to speak to other children in any language

but Hebrew. Until he was five, Itamar had no friends of his own age.

In 1882 Ben-Yehuda and Bachar formulated an agreement for a semi-clandestine association, *Sefer Habrit* (Book of the Covenant), which had to be kept secret because the Turks forbade any nationalist manifestos. The association's major goals were to "be Israelites in the Land of their Forefathers" and to urge people to earn their daily bread through commerce and industry. Ben-Yehuda intended to establish colonies in Eretz Israel that would be self-sufficient and even learn how to use arms. These ideas were not associated with the revival of the Hebrew language, but since Ben-Yehuda's primary contribution to Zionism was his revival of Hebrew, these other aspects of his activities are not shown in the film.

In a sharp transition from the family home with children and guests aplenty, the scene cuts to Ben-Yehuda, sitting alone in the New York City Public Library, as was his custom. It is closing time, but Ben-Yehuda refuses to leave the reading room, since he is searching for a word he "lost." The noun "word" runs through the film as a theme. Indeed, Ben-Yehuda coined a new word to mean "dictionary"—*milon*—from the Hebrew word for "word"—*milab*. This neologism encapsulates his lifetime, which was almost entirely focused on words. He even recruited his family to coin new words and "ordered" them to spread the new words everywhere they went. Ben-Yehuda forbade his wife to speak with his young son in any other language but Hebrew, so that Ben-Zion would grow up with Hebrew as his mother tongue. She finds it difficult to find Hebrew words to calm the child down during the night. In the film, numerous fights break out in the family due to the pressure of being forbidden to speak with neighbors and tradesmen who do not know Hebrew.

The next scene shows Ben-Yehuda going out into the street and meeting Yevgeny Chirikov, known by his underground name of Nikolai Nikolaevitch Tschashnikov, at the newsstand. Tschashnikov was a distributor of Communist newspapers, and the film allows viewers to infer his political leanings. Like Bachar, Tschashnikov was a major figure in Ben-Yehuda's early life. They met for the first time in 1877 in Paris (although in the film, they know each other when they meet on the train to Paris, where Ben-Yehuda was headed to study medicine). During the course of their conversation in the film, it is evident that Tschashnikov is a trusted comrade who introduced Ben-Yehuda to the pleasures of Paris and later accompanied him to the Land of Israel. Tschashnikov was not Jewish, and his motives are unclear. Tschashnikov finances Ben-Yehuda's stay in Eretz Israel. When he leaves, he introduces him to the Russian consul, Kozivnikov. The interpreter of the consulate (a former Jew who converted after being conscripted into the czarist army) now becomes Ben-Yehuda's patron and helps him financially.

Most of Ben-Yehuda's biographers are convinced that Tschashnikov was an agent of the Russian secret police, operating in Europe and the Middle East. It may be that he employed Ben-Yehuda to obtain information, but this has not been proved. Since his relationship to Ben-Yehuda is unclear, he appears sparingly in the film.

Meanwhile, in a flashback to the family apartment in New York, the hostess engages her guests in conversation. When one of the guests asks how Eliezer embarked on his quest, Hemda attributes it to a vision he had in his sleep after the Balkan Wars. This happened when he was a gymnasium student, before he contracted tuberculosis. The viewer is now aware that Ben-Yehuda knew about his illness before his first marriage. This triggers a

flashback to Vienna, when Eliezer learned that his illness is a death sentence and that he should not marry. He informs Devorah that their wedding is off, but she decides to meet him there, marry him, and remain at his side as his wife. In Vienna they still speak Russian and French, but they make a covenant to speak only Hebrew with each other. In reality, the two were married in Alexandria and then traveled to Constantinople, where they met Tschashnikov and journeyed on to the Land of Israel. This point disappears from the film because the director preferred to focus on the newlyweds as they arrive in the country, and on their passionate devotion to the Hebrew language.

Ben-Yehuda's concern for Hebrew language and culture was not free of the nationalist aims that became the cornerstones of the entire Zionist movement, but these have no place in the screenplay. One example is a political article that Ben-Yehuda published in Paris, under the headline "A Burning Question." This extremely important article was the first of many for Ben-Yehuda. He used unambiguous language to resolve questions discussed by Jews throughout history. His opinion was that a political solution was the only alternative to the historical and current diasporic situation of the Jewish people. He wrote: "The nationalist feeling is deep-seated in the human spirit, and all modern history is an unceasing struggle between each nation's desire to preserve its separate nationalist identity and the transcendence of nationalism in the universalist and classless utopia envisioned in Socialist and Communist theories. In reality, there is no difference between the aspirations of the nations and the aspirations of the Jewish people" (quoted in Even-Zohar, 1980).

To promote the cause, Ben-Yehuda stated that the Hebrew language would be the foundation for a Jewish national revival and constitute a counter-



weight to Yiddish. The Sephardic pronunciation would prevail instead of the Ashkenazi pronunciation, which symbolized the Diaspora. Ben-Yehuda refuted the “Father of the Enlightenment,” Moses Mendelssohn, who stated that the Jews do not need national sovereignty because they are only a religious community. He enumerated the values that Jews have in common, and that give them the right to be defined as a nation: a common historical past and a shared faith in an ancestral homeland. For the first time, he signed his name as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda instead of Eliezer Perlman.

In a scene set back in New York, Ben-Yehuda finally comes back to his apartment to be with his friends. The director portrays him as a capricious person, a stubborn man with mood swings, distracted from everyday matters by his obsession with writing the dictionary. He begins by speaking of his dream to return to the Land of Israel and his discomfort about living in the United States: “I feel that I am betraying everything that I preached about. Until the end of the film, the viewer never realizes why he temporarily left Eretz Israel for the United States.

The film reveals how the New Yishuv subsisted on donations from abroad. Under the Ottoman Empire, then under the British Mandate, and even through the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the New Yishuv benefited from monetary contributions from the Jews of the Diaspora to the settlers in the barren country. Funds collected by the Jewish Agency, the Jewish National Fund, the Joint Distribution Committee, and other relevant organizations financed the settlers’ purchase of land and investment in industry. American Jews played a major role in funding the pioneers, and Eli Cohen portrays this very precisely in the next scene. Ben-Yehuda arrives

home to find that an American donor has been waiting for him. Their conversation concretizes the tension—familiar now as well as then—between donor and recipient, between the man who holds the purse strings and the recipient of the funds. Ben-Yehuda hates having to grovel before his guest, but finally Bachar pressures him to give in.

During the film, Ben-Yehuda experiences flashbacks of his imprisonment by Turkish authorities in Jerusalem after ultra-Orthodox Jews informed on him as someone calling for revolt against their rule. The film does not explain precisely why he was sent to prison, but it does convey the fact that the experience was extremely traumatic for him and his family. In one of the most moving scenes of the film, the entire Ben-Yehuda family is excommunicated by the ultra-Orthodox community, which accuses them of desecrating the holy tongue by using Hebrew for daily use and in his articles in *Hatzevi*, the Hebrew newspaper he founded. Ben-Yehuda called on people to stop accepting *halukah* money for religious study and to begin building the Land of Israel by the sweat of their brow. Things reached such a point that when his first wife, Devorah, died in 1891, the Ashkenazi Burial Society refused to bury her. Mourning her deeply, Ben-Yehuda appealed to the Sephardic society, which buried her.

In an interview, the director Eli Cohen told how during the filming on the Mount of Olives, ultra-Orthodox men gathered around the grave to find out what was going on, and to see if, in their view, the shoot would desecrate the holiness of the place. The trouble his film crew experienced illustrates the tensions that reigned in Jerusalem in the past and the present. The Zionists build the land with their labor, while the ultra-Orthodox Askenazim feel justified living off

donations, considering “their Torah scholarship to be their craft,” as a common adage puts it. The latter regarded Ben-Yehuda as a heretic.

The film concludes with the arrival of a telegram from the Jewish Agency, communicating the good news about the Balfour Declaration issued in November 1917. It stated that England would “favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” and would “facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

Ben-Yehuda is revered in Israeli memory as the father of modern Hebrew. He transformed the biblical language into a spoken one. His influence was also obvious on Theodor Herzl and his ideas. Soon after Herzl’s utopian book, “*Altneuland*” (The old new land), appeared, he emphasized that the Jewish state should be established in Eretz Israel and that the language of the state should be Hebrew. The perspective of many years allows us to see that what the two visionaries had in common was more than could have been imagined during their lifetimes, not only in terms of their philosophies, but also in the details of their lives. As one historian has observed, the initiatives by Ben-Yehuda and his colleagues were the philosophical infrastructure that Herzl used to develop his ideas.

Despite the unique status accorded to Ben-Yehuda in Israeli historiography, there are those who object to his being dubbed the father of Hebrew, since other teachers of modern Hebrew had preceded him. Ben-Yehuda’s other ideas—such as establishing a state for the Jewish people, or at least trying to concentrate as many Jews as pos-

sible in their own territory—have disappeared from the collective memory because they were ahead of their time. It was in the context of Balkan nationalism that Ben-Yehuda developed his ideas for reviving the Hebrew language as a rallying point for cultural autonomy, but Eli Cohen’s film does not refer to that context. The film mentions only briefly the critical tension between Ben-Yehuda and the ultra-Orthodox Jews, and does not discuss the “language wars” of 1913, the debates about whether German or Hebrew would be the language of instruction at the Technion, the Institute of Technology in Haifa.

The film depicts Ben-Yehuda as a paragon of nationalist identity. But viewers should remember that no film can tell everything about a person. Especially in a low-budget film like this—which may have been censored—the director must make choices about what information to include. Some critics charged that during the years the film aired on television, government representatives at the Israel Broadcasting Authority, which had a nationalist and religious orientation, wanted a film that would be acceptable to a broad spectrum of viewers without being controversial. However, this is not how things seemed to the film’s director. In an interview I had with him, Eli Cohen emphasized that this was the material he was given to work with. “The canvas was too small, the budget ran out, and we had to make a film that would be short and to the point. . . . All the rest, of course,” he hinted to his critics, “arose from simple ignorance and lack of back-up support.” Viewers can only regret not knowing more about one of the founding fathers of Israeli culture. Still, the film constitutes a media jewel from the television productions of that period.

World War I ended in 1918. In the spring of 1919, the Ben-Yehuda family returned to Eretz

Israel. In 1922, British High Commissioner Sir Herbert Samuel declared that the Hebrew language was one of the three official languages of Eretz Israel. In December of that year, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda passed away from tuberculosis, while working on his dictionary's entry for the Hebrew word for "soul."

Source: Ben-Yehuda, Eliezer, *A Dream Come True*, trans. T. Muraoka, ed. George Mandel (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).

Background: [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben\\_yehuda.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben_yehuda.html).

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## 16. *They Were Ten* Revisited

### Zionism, Trauma, and New Identity

ELDAD KEDEM AND BENJAMIN BEN-DAVID

*They Were Ten* (*Hem Hayu Asarah*), directed by Baruch Dinar [EM]  
Israel, 1961

*They Were Ten* tells anew the story of the pioneering act of Eastern European Jews who immigrated to the Land of Israel at the end of the nineteenth century. The film is considered a remake of Aleksander Ford's *Sabra*, also known as *Chalutzim* (1933), which was one of the first action feature films to be shot in Palestine. In 1987 the director Uri Barbash created an updated version, *Ha-Holmim* (*The Unsettled Land*, also known as *Once We Were Dreamers*) in which he critically examined, from a post-Zionist perspective, the ideological values of the two earlier versions. This phenomenon of repetition and the desire to retell reflect the obsession of Israeli culture to engage with the components of the national Israeli identity: the Jewish past and the Jewish Israeli present, issues of territory and establishing roots on the land, personal and collective identity, the Israeli-Arab conflict, and universal themes of morality and justice.

Israeli cinema experts have labeled both the period when *They Were Ten* was made, and its genre, "national heroic." Between 1955 and 1968, a handful of films were made in Israel that related to the struggle against the British Mandate, the War of Independence (1948), and the Six Day War (1967), including *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (1955), *Pillar of Fire* (1959), and *He Walked in the Fields*