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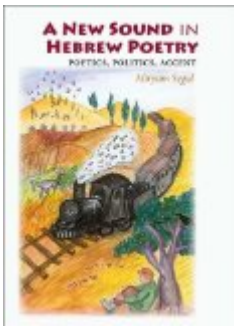

Miryam Segal. *A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry: Poetics, Politics, Accent.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xxi + 206 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-35243-9.

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In the late 1990s, the Israeli Reform movement started a congregation in the new city of Modi'in (Israel). Reform Judaism in Israel was largely imported and supported by the American movement. Modi'in, a city built from scratch and aimed at attracting young middle-class families from the overcrowded cities of Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, provided a new footing for the Reform movement. It is not surprising then that a sincere effort was made to lead services and prayers that would cater to the hearts and ears of the Israeli Sabra congregant. However, one particular prayer, *Ahavat Olam* (eternal love), became a proxy battleground between what was identified as "American" Ashkenazi accent versus "Israeli" (Sephardic) accent. As it happened, the prayer *Ahavat Olam*, sung to the music of American composer Debbie Friedman, required that the word "Torah" be pronounced with an Ashkenazi accent, stressing the first syllable--*To*rah. The Israeli accent, following the Sephardic pronunciation, puts the stress on the final syllable--To*rah*. The stakes were high; it seemed that the growth of the congregation in Modi'in came to depend on its ability to sing *Ahavat Olam* the *Israeli* way. The religious, cultural, and political divides were highlighted by the stress of a single syllable. How did we get to this point?

Miryam Segal's interdisciplinary research is "a genealogy of the proto-Israeli accent as it functioned in the burgeoning Hebrew literature of Palestine" and an exploration of "the role of poetry in the formation of national identity" (p. 4). The "new sound," a Sephardicized accent, became the symbol of the "authentic" and at the same time "the modern" national language. Segal's research extends well beyond a linguistic and syntactic examination of the development of modern Hebrew.

Segal describes the historical transition and evolution of pronunciation of a variety of poetic forms incorporating linguistic investigation, social sciences lenses, and close reading of texts. She presents the reader with a unique opportunity to follow the nexus of art (in this case poetry), ideology, politics, and education in conjunction with

the Zionist endeavor of nation building. The interdisciplinary nature of her work also makes it relevant for readers coming from different disciplines and with different interests pertaining to the connection of language and politics of identities.

The rise of the modern nation-state, mainly from the end of the nineteenth century, gave birth to the ideal of an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogeneous population. However, Eric Hobsbawm reminds us that "nothing is less common than countries inhabited exclusively by people of a single uniform language and culture."[1] An investigation of the development of languages in modern times requires special critical attention to the sociopolitical contexts and in particular the role of national ideology in the education system. Segal traces "the transition from the Ashkenazic to the so-called Land of Israel accent in Hebrew poetry" between the years 1890 and 1930 by "offering an alternative genealogy of the new accent," which approaches "these linguistic-poetic phenomena as effects of pedagogic and political institutions in Palestine" (pp. xiii, 17). The majority of nationalist Jews, and of the poets, in the emerging new *Yishuv* in Palestine were Eastern European Jews who spoke and wrote in an Ashkenazi accent. However, the leaders and pedagogues came to a consensus that "some kind of Sephardic Hebrew" was more authentic, and thus a "more appropriate choice for the national language" (p. 4). This quest for an "authentic" sounding Hebrew speech led to deliberate attempts by pedagogues and rebel poets to revive and transform the Hebrew sound. To fulfill its role in the nation-building effort the reconstructed language had to fulfill the values of authenticity, modernity, and unification simultaneously.

A predominant claim in scholarship of Hebrew literature is that Hebrew poetry played a major role in the formation of the national identity. The so-called new Hebrew poet was expected to recommence the qualities of a biblical prophet--to identify the eternal laws governing national history, to warn against dangerous deviations from the correct path, and to guide the political leaders.[2] Therefore, one might expect that the push for a "new Hebrew sound" would have been conceived and generated first and foremost by the Hebrew poets. However, as Segal demonstrates in the first chapter, "it was the pedagogues who, over the course of about thirty years, presided over Hebrew's successive integration into the classroom at all levels,... the rise in status [of the reconstructed Sephardic accent] was responsible for poetry's eventual adoption of the new accent" (p. 21). Segal suggests that research on the evolution of the new Hebrew accent should focus first on the school system and not on the role of literary elites, since these institutions "indirectly motivated the shift in poetry" (p. 24). However, Segal asks "why did the integration of the new accent into poetry take so long, between twenty-five and thirty years after teachers first tried to adopt it in spoken Hebrew?" (p. 21).

In chapter 2, Segal examines the ideological underpinnings of documents of the Teachers' Association meetings of 1895, 1903, and 1904; the Language Committee (***Va'ad HaLashon***) of 1913; David Yellin's 1908 update on the new accents; and the joint meeting of the language and teachers' organizations of 1911. The transformation of particular modes of speech and writing into a unified national language was motivated by the idea that nation building depends on linguistic unification. The quest for a unified national language coincided with the ideal of authenticity. National revival movements strove to anchor nation building in authentic roots. Aligned with this motivation, the revival of Hebrew had to be connected to what was agreed on as authentic Hebrew sound. In a paradoxical way, the attempt to impose an "authentic" national language that corresponds to the national territory "requires a mapping or a remapping of authentic dialects" (p. 56). It is a reconstructed "authenticity" that suppresses the regional dialects, such as the Galilean accent, and dialects that are identified as exilic. However, one

must note that these foreign dialects (Ashkenazic, Galilean) were in fact authentic to the speakers of the language. When the Language Committee of 1913 voted to adopt the "Sephardic" accent as the national accent it was in fact an acceptance of the prevailing status propagated by the pedagogues ever since the 1895 and 1903 meetings of the Teachers' Association. Yet neither the pedagogues nor the scholars, such as Yellin and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, were successful in imposing a "top-down" reconstructed "authentic" dialect. Different forces were in action. The so-called authentic sound that ended up prevailing in the schools was an Ashkenazic version of Sephardic Hebrew, closer to Ben-Yehuda's Hybrid Hebrew. It was an accent that "was simply the closest to a default attempt by Ashkenazic speakers to sound more Sephardic" (p. 70). This kind of accent was considered by pedagogues "not quite correct and not quite Sephardic enough." As it was, the de facto dialect of the schools became the authentic dialect that served "as a symbolic link between ancient sovereignty and the modern Jewish presence in Mandatory Palestine" (p. 72). Hebrew poets, so it seems, adapted to the new accent used in schools and were not the vanguard force behind the change in the Hebrew sound. Indeed, the new Hebrew sound is more a result of a "bottom-up" process occurring in the classrooms and the streets rather than an intentional "top-down" reconstructed dialect. It is my impression that this point could have been described and developed further in Segal's book. Segal's analysis contributes an important alternative lens through which the story of the "revival" and reconstruction of modern Hebrew may be understood. Given the prevalence of "top-down" forces of elite groups in nation building, elaboration of "street level" developments and forces could have provided a radically new and subversive perspective on the history of the *Yishuv*.

In the same manner that the history of the general acceptance of the "new-authentic" dialect by the Hebrew speakers of the new *Yishuv* is reconstructed, so Segal analyzes the absorption of the new sound into Hebrew poetry. Female poets, such as Elishevah Bihovsky, Rahel Bluvshtain, Adah Amir, and Ester Rab, had been writing poetry in the new accent (Sephardic stress system) since the late teens and early twenties. Male poets, such as Yitshak Lamdan, Uri Z. Greenberg, and Avraham Shlonsky, the most influential labor poets, did not complete the transition to the new accent until the late 1920s. Nevertheless, it is Shlonsky, and not one of the women poets, who is commonly credited with the revolution of the new accent in Hebrew poetry. In chapter 3--"'Listening to Her Is Torture': The Menace of a Male Voice in a Woman's Body"--Segal illuminates the cultural reasons that account for the fact that women's poetry introduced a new accent before men's poetry yet did not enjoy the recognition of innovators and integrators of the new accent into the Hebrew poetic corpus. Informed by gender theories, Segal explains how women's poetry, using the new accent, was "symbolically important, as signs of great progress toward modern and authentic national identity" (p. 74). However, it was precisely the association between women and contemporary spoken Hebrew that contributed to the lack of appreciation and the limited reception of their poetry as mere ditties. These conditions enabled women to experiment and develop the new sound in Hebrew poetry while flying under the radar of contemporary literary criticism and scholarship of their time.

In chapter 4--"The Runaway Train and the Yiddish Kid: Shlonsky's Double Inscription"--Segal turns to the poet who is most identified with the revolution of the new sound in Hebrew poetry. Here Segal offers a close reading of several of Shlonsky's poems and traces his gradual and strategic introduction of the new accent to the literary scene. She agrees with the accepted views in scholarship that "Shlonsky was critical to--if not the motivating force behind--the literary accent shift" (p. 100). She demonstrates both his mastery of the poetic art and his strategic planning in in-

troducing the new accent to the Hebrew literary scene: a structural revolution that walked hand in hand with his endeavor to situate himself as a central figure of the new generation of poets and the inheritor of Hayim Nahman Bialik. However, she challenges the overall accepted opinion crediting Shlonsky with the revolution of the new accent, stating that "among his generation of poets he was far from the first to compose in the new accent" (p. 100). Segal notes that the "imprecise claims of Avraham Shlonsky's primacy ... obfuscate the nature of his considerable contribution" (p. 101). She embarks on an elaborate technical analysis of several of his poems, demonstrating his perceptive ear for contemporary language and his genius in creating inventive Hebrew neologisms "second only to Eliezer Ben–Yehuda" (p. 125). Shlonsky first started introducing the new accent with folk songs. "It allowed him to experiment with new-accent composition, it 'prepared' the Hebrew-speaking audience for lyric composition in the new accent, and it served as a forum in which Shlonsky could characterize the new accent as enacting a sharp break with the past" (p. 107).

Shlonsky established himself on center stage through a combination of cultural leadership and creative enterprises; he was a journalist, an essayist, a translator, and the organizer of new literary circles. Segal's use of social and gender theory in previous chapters of the book could here have helped to explain that Shlonsky's success lay in his political strategy and not just his mastery of language. In this respect, the flow of the argument and the cohesiveness of the work could have been further developed.

The Israeli shift from a European centered culture, striving to adopt the Sephardic stress as a more "authentic" sound, into a society in which a significant number of its members are of North African and Middle Eastern origin, is worthy of further research. Segal's insightful and carefully crafted work opens the door to a fresh way of exploring the evolvement of contemporary Hebrew.

Notes

[1]. Eric Hobsbawm, "Language, Culture, and National Identity," ***Social Research*** 63, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 1068.

[2]. Dan Miron, ***The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry and Other Essays on Modern Hebrew Poetry*** (New Milford and London: Toby Press, 2010).

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