

# The Language That Came Back from the Dead

*Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the boy raised in silence, and the only successful language revival in recorded history.*

By **Brett Henry** · July 8, 2026

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In 1881, the number of people on earth who spoke Hebrew as a native language was approximately zero. And it had been that way for roughly seventeen hundred years. Most dead languages die by fading into eternal silence as their last speakers age out of time and space. Hebrew, against all precedent, did the exact opposite. It survived fully intact across every continent where Jewish communities settled. Jews read it, prayed in it, studied it, debated in it, and wrote poetry in it. Only they did not speak it to their children.

Today, approximately nine million people speak Hebrew. Around 6.5 million of them are native speakers. Israeli children debate in it. Software engineers debug code in it. Teenagers text in it. Courts hand down rulings in it. It is the living, working, and daily language of a sovereign nation.

Remarkably, no other language in recorded history has made this journey.

# The First Native Speaker in Seventeen Centuries

On July 31, 1882, in Jerusalem, a boy named Ben-Zion was born to Eliezer and Devora Ben-Yehuda. His father had arrived in Jaffa the year before with tuberculosis and a plan that most people in the city considered either delusional or sacrilegious: to raise a child in Hebrew as a living language, the kind spoken at the dinner table and in the market, not just recited in the synagogue. The kind that would stretch beyond “abba” and reach unto the fabric of human existence in such a way that it would do so much more than communicate words; it would impart identity.

The household rules were absolute. No other language was permitted to be spoken. When Eliezer caught Devora singing a Russian lullaby to the baby, he stopped her. The boy had no playmates. Other children on the street spoke Yiddish, Arabic, Ladino, French, or German, and Ben-Zion was not allowed to hear them.

He did not speak his first words until he was nearly three and his mother worried. On her side of the family, children had begun speaking before their first birthdays. But Ben-Yehuda could not fail. If one child could grow up speaking Hebrew, then the language could live again. If the child could not, the entire premise would collapse.

When the boy finally spoke, he spoke in Hebrew. He was, as far as anyone can document, the first native Hebrew speaker in roughly seventeen hundred years.

The cost for Ben-Zion was significant. He grew up isolated, strange among his peers, a boy who spoke a language no other child on his street could understand. Three of his younger siblings died in a diphtheria epidemic. His mother Devora, who had agreed to speak only Hebrew in a city where she knew nobody and the language hardly functioned for daily conversation, died of tuberculosis in 1891. She was not yet thirty and Ben-Yehuda later married her younger sister, Hemda, who continued the Hebrew-speaking household and became a journalist and author in her own right.

# A Language That Had No Words for the Modern World

Hebrew ceased to function as an everyday spoken language around the second century CE. After the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the crushing of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE, the surviving Jewish population in the land of Israel scattered. They shifted to Aramaic and then to the languages of whatever lands received them. Hebrew became what linguists call a “dead language.” That does not mean it disappeared. It means it no longer had native speakers.

The distinction matters. For seventeen centuries, Hebrew was the connective tissue of Jewish civilization. A Jew from Baghdad and a Jew from Kraków could correspond in Hebrew. Legal opinions, religious commentary, and poetry continued to be produced in it across the entire medieval and early modern period. It was read aloud in every synagogue on earth every week. But no child was born into it. No one learned it from their mother’s voice.

And it had no vocabulary for the modern world. In 1881, Hebrew had no word for newspaper, ice cream, towel, bicycle, dictionary, tomato, or bacteria. Its lexicon was built for ancient agriculture, temple ritual, and rabbinic jurisprudence. The entire apparatus of industrial and modern life was missing.

# His Neighbors Excommunicated Him for Trying

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was born Eliezer Yitzhak Perlman in 1858, in Luzhki, in the Vilna Governorate of the Russian Empire (now Belarus). He was educated in traditional yeshivas (religious Jewish schools), then exposed to secular Russian literature and the nationalist movements of the 1870s.

He arrived in Jaffa in October 1881 with his wife Devora Jonas and immediately informed her that they would speak only Hebrew from that moment on.

The opposition was immediate and came from multiple directions.

The ultra-Orthodox community in Jerusalem at the time viewed Hebrew as *lashon hakodesh*, the holy tongue. It belonged to God, to the Torah, to the study hall. Using it to ask someone to pass the bread was profanation. They declared a herem, a formal excommunication, against Ben-Yehuda. Some went further. When the Ottoman authorities arrested Ben-Yehuda on sedition charges in 1893 over an article in his newspaper, it was reportedly members of the ultra-Orthodox community who had filed the complaint.

There was also a political opposition. The Yiddishists, a substantial movement among European Jews, argued that Yiddish was the authentic Jewish national language. It was already alive, evolving, and spoken by millions. Why engineer the resurrection of a liturgical language when a living one was right there?

And there was a practical objection that even sympathizers shared — that Hebrew simply did not have the words for daily life. You could discuss the Exodus in it but you could not discuss a train schedule, a doctor visit, or the moves in a game of sheshbesh (backgammon). Was the resurrected language sufficient for the modern world?

Ben-Yehuda's response was to build the words himself. He coined hundreds: *iton* (newspaper), *glida* (ice cream, from the rabbinic root for freezing), *magevet* (towel), *ofanayim* (bicycle, from *ofan*, the biblical word for wheel), *milon* (dictionary), *agvaniya* (tomato), *havita* (omelette), *haidak* (bacteria). He drew on ancient Hebrew and Aramaic roots, bending them into new forms that could carry the weight of modernity. He published a Hebrew-language newspaper, HaTzvi, to demonstrate that the language could carry journalism. And in 1890, he organized the Va'ad HaLashon, the Language Committee, to standardize new terminology across the growing number of Hebrew speakers in Eretz Israel.

# The War That Made Hebrew Permanent

The turning point came in 1913, but it had nothing to do with Ben-Yehuda's upbringing.

The Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden, a German-Jewish philanthropic organization, was building a technical college in Haifa called the Technion. The Hilfsverein planned to use German as the language of instruction. The argument was reasonable on its face: Hebrew still lacked sufficient vocabulary for engineering, mathematics, and the natural sciences. German did not, of course. If the goal was to produce competent engineers, German was the logical choice.

The Jewish community in Eretz Israel revolted. Students walked out of Hilfsverein schools. Teachers resigned. Parents pulled their children and enrolled them in hastily established Hebrew-language alternatives. The conflict became known as the *Milchemet HaSafot*, the War of the Languages, and it was fought in classrooms and auditoriums, not on battlefields.

The Hilfsverein capitulated. When the Technion finally opened its doors in 1924, it taught in Hebrew. The institution that was supposed to prove Hebrew could not handle science became proof that it could.

An entire community decided, collectively and without central coordination, that they would educate their children in a language that had been dead for seventeen centuries rather than accept a perfectly functional living one. They chose complexity, continuity and conviction over comfort and convenience. Within a decade, the Technion's faculty were producing original scientific terminology in Hebrew, filling exactly the gaps the Hilfsverein had warned about.

# Children Finished What Obsessives Started

Ben-Yehuda could coin words. He could publish newspapers and organize committees and raise one extraordinary child in a Hebrew-speaking home. But he could not, alone, create a living language. A living language requires the one thing that cannot be engineered: children who grow up in it without thinking about it or being alienated because of it.

And then the children came. As Jewish immigration to Eretz Israel accelerated in the early twentieth century, families arrived speaking Yiddish, Russian, Arabic, Polish, German, Ladino, and dozens of other mother tongues, but their children entered Hebrew-speaking schools. Within a generation, those children were speaking Hebrew to each other with the fluency and carelessness that marks a true first language. They had turned a revival project into an irreversible reality.

By the time Israel declared independence in 1948, among Jews born in Eretz Israel, more than 80 percent spoke Hebrew as their sole daily language. Another 14 percent used it as their primary language alongside a second one. Among children under fifteen, the figure was 93 percent.

The massive wave of immigration that followed statehood temporarily diluted these numbers. In 1948, roughly 75 percent of the population spoke Hebrew. By the end of 1950, after absorbing hundreds of thousands of new arrivals from Iraq, Yemen, Morocco, Libya, Poland, Romania, and elsewhere, the figure had dropped to about 60 percent. The new arrivals brought Judeo-Arabic, Yiddish, Ladino, French, Romanian, Persian, and dozens of others.

But the pattern held strong. The immigrants' children entered Hebrew-speaking schools just as before independence. Their parents enrolled in ulpan classes, intensive Hebrew-language programs designed specifically for adult immigrants. Within a single generation, the language absorbed everyone it touched. The children of Yemeni Jews, Iraqi Jews, and Polish Jews grew up speaking the same language. Hebrew became not just a national language but a unifying bond — the first common tongue the Jewish people had shared in daily life since antiquity.

# Seventeen Volumes He Never Finished

Ben-Yehuda spent the last decades of his life working on *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*. He published the first volume in 1908. The dictionary would eventually run to seventeen volumes. Sadly, he lived to see only a few of them.

He died on December 16, 1922, of the tuberculosis that had followed him from Lithuania. He was sixty-four years old. Thirty thousand people attended his funeral. One month earlier, the British Mandate authorities had recognized Hebrew as one of three official languages of Eretz Israel, alongside English and Arabic. He had spent forty-one years proving it could be done, and he died just weeks after the authorities agreed with him.

His second wife, Hemda, his son Ehud, and the linguist Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai completed the dictionary. The final volume was published in 1959.

The Language Committee that Ben-Yehuda had organized in 1890 became, in 1953, the Academy of the Hebrew Language, established by an act of the Knesset. It continues his work even to this day. When Hebrew needs a word for something that did not exist in antiquity, the Academy builds one from ancient roots. For example, the word for “computer,” *machshev*, comes from the root *ch-sh-v*, meaning “to think.” And the word for “electricity,” *chashmal*, comes from a term that appears in the Book of Ezekiel, where it describes a mysterious gleaming substance in the prophet’s vision. It waited twenty-five centuries for someone to need it, and that time had finally come.

And still the process continues. Modern Hebrew’s vocabulary now exceeds 150,000 words, far more than the Biblical lexicon. Every technological shift, every new field of science, every cultural import generates new linguistic needs. And thus the Academy keeps building. Because of how powerful examples are, the word for “passport,” *darkon*, comes from *derech*, the ancient word for “road.” The old roots have new purposes.

# Nine Million Speakers of a Language That Was Dead

Today, approximately nine million people worldwide speak Hebrew. Around 6.5 million are native speakers, concentrated in Israel, with smaller communities in the United States and elsewhere. It is the language of Israeli courts, universities, journalism, military operations, and daily life. It is the language of startups and of synagogues. It is the language children use when they play with their siblings or debate who gets the last piece of cake.

The continuity between modern and Biblical Hebrew is remarkable. For instance, some words have changed meaning. The Biblical word mokesh, meaning “snare” or “trap,” now means a land mine. And now an Israeli high school student reading the Book of Psalms in the original encounters language that is recognizably their own. The grammar has shifted and the vocabulary has expanded enormously, but the root remains fully intact.

As you can now see, this is entirely without precedent. Other languages also have revival movements. Irish, with decades of state support and compulsory education in the Republic of Ireland, has roughly 70,000 daily speakers in a country of five million. Welsh has about 880,000 speakers after sustained investment. Cornish, declared extinct in 1777 and subsequently revived, has perhaps 500 people with some degree of fluency. Manx has roughly 2,000.

These are serious, admirable efforts by people who care deeply about their heritage. Still, they have produced bilingual communities. The children of Welsh-speaking families grow up fluent in Welsh and also in English. The children of Hebrew-speaking families in Israel grow up in Hebrew. It is their first and often only language until they begin studying English in school — an outcome of an entirely different proportion.

It is also worth noting that the linguist Ghil'ad Zuckermann of the University of Adelaide has argued that what Israelis speak is more accurately described as “Israeli,” a hybrid language shaped by the Yiddish, Russian, Polish, and Arabic of the early settlers as much as by the Biblical source material. The debate is real and the scholarship is valuable. But even Zuckermann does not dispute the central fact. Whatever you call it, a language that had no native speakers for seventeen centuries now has millions of them. The once dead language is alive again.

## *Dry bones, anyone?*

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## Sources & note

Eretz Israel refers to one of the Biblical names of the Land of Israel, used 31 times in the book of Ezekiel. Most famously, it is used in [Ezekiel 47:18](#) when Ezekiel sees the vision of Israel restored, the River of Life flowing out of God's temple, the dead land healing, the territory of the tribes of Israel being reassigned by God, and Jerusalem renamed to "ADONAI Shammah — The LORD is There." In this article, "Eretz Israel" distinguishes a pre-1948 state and "Israel" denotes a post-1948 state. The world uses the term Palestine, a derogatory phrase (originally Syria Palaestina) given by the Romans in 135 CE after the Bar Kokhba revolt, when Emperor Hadrian decided to attempt to weaken the Jewish association to the Land of Israel by naming it after the Jews' greatest adversary, the Philistines. In the same way, what the world calls the West Bank is called Judea & Samaria in the Bible, first mentioned in [Ezra 5:8](#) and [1 Kings 16:24](#), respectively.

- ◆ [National Geographic: Hebrew Wasn't Spoken for 2,000 Years](#)
- ◆ [World Population Review: Hebrew-Speaking Countries](#)
- ◆ [Wikipedia: Itamar Ben-Avi](#)
- ◆ [My Jewish Learning: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda](#)
- ◆ [Wikipedia: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda](#)
- ◆ [Wikipedia: Revival of the Hebrew Language](#)
- ◆ [Wikipedia: War of the Languages](#)
- ◆ [Wikipedia: Ben-Yehuda Dictionary](#)
- ◆ [Wikipedia: Languages of Israel](#)
- ◆ [Wikipedia: Hebrew Language](#)
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- ◆ [Wikipedia: Ghil'ad Zuckermann](#)
- ◆ [Academy of the Hebrew Language: Our History](#)
- ◆ [Ethnologue: Hebrew](#)