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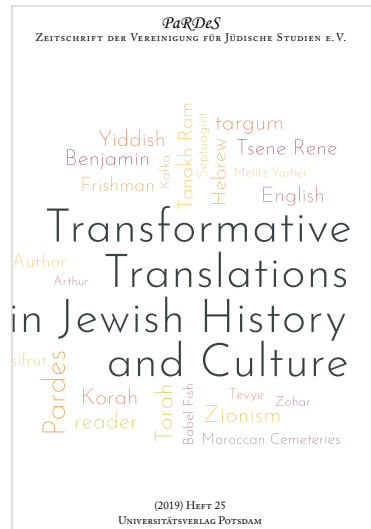
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Tanakh Ram: Translating the Hebrew Bible into Israeli

by Gitit Holzman and Ghil'ad Zuckermann

Abstract

The Ram Bible (Tanakh Ram) is a recently-published Bible edition printed in two columns: the right-hand column features the original biblical Hebrew text and the left-hand column features the translation of the Bible into a high-register literary Israeli (Reclaimed Hebrew). The Ram Bible edition has gained impressive academic and popular attention. This paper looks at differences between academics, teachers, students, media personalities and senior officials in the education system, regarding their attitude to the Ram Bible. Our study reveals that Bible teachers and students who make frequent use of this edition understand its contribution to comprehending the biblical language, stories, and ideas. Opponents of Ram Bible are typically administrators and theoretician scholars who advocate the importance of teaching the Bible but do not actually teach it themselves. We argue that the fundamental difference between biblical Hebrew and Israeli makes the Hebrew Bible incomprehensible to native Israeli speakers. We explain the advantages of employing tools such as the Ram Bible.

Rabbah said: Even if one's parents have left him a Sefer Torah, yet it is proper that he should write one of his own.
(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin Folio 21a)

1. Introduction

A unique Bible edition entitled Tanakh Ram was published in Israel in 2010. This edition is printed in two columns. The right-hand column (see the example below, featuring Genesis 1:1–3) features the Hebrew Bible in its original Masoretic text, and the left-hand column features the translation of the Bible into a high-register form of literary Reclaimed Hebrew (henceforth, Israeli)

by Abraham Ahuviya, an educator and Bible scholar who served as a senior official at the Israeli Education Ministry.¹ So far the Torah (Pentateuch) and some of the books of Prophets were published, while publication of the other books of Prophets as well *Ketuvim* (Scriptures) is due in the future.

GENESIS 1:1–3	
<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
בְּתַחֲלַת הַבְּרִיאָה, כִּשְׂבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעוֹלָם,	בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ.
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה שׁוּמְמָה וְרִיקָה, וְהָיָה חֹשֶׁךְ מֵעַל מִי הַתְּהוֹם שִׁפְסוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ,	וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְּהוֹ וְנְהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם;
וַיְרֵא אֱלֹהִים הָיְתָה מְרַחֶפֶת עַל פְּנֵיהֶם, אָמַר אֱלֹהִים: "יְהִי אֹר!" וַיְהִי אֹר.	וַיְרֵא אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי-אֹר.

Ahuviya had explained the reasons for creating this translation in the preface to his edition, saying that as the biblical language is incomprehensible for Israeli speakers they cannot understand its meaning, thus a translation of biblical Hebrew into Israeli (our term) is required.² Ahuviya emphasized he had never intended to replace the Bible, but rather hoped to provide the readers with a useful tool that could enable them to understand its content and arouse their ambition to read the original text.³

2. **Tanakh Ram: Students, Parents, Teachers, and the Israeli Ministry of Education**

Tanakh Ram has received considerable public attention in Israel by the media, as well as by scholars and laypeople. By and large, the interested parties belong to two main groups:

1. teachers and students who make frequent use of this edition and thus acquire unmediated insight of its useful qualities, and

¹ Avraham Ahuvia, *Tanakh Ram: The Biblical Text in Modern Hebrew*, vol 1: Tora, edited by Rafi Moses. (Herzeliya: Ram; Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot-Sifrey Hemed) 2010 (Israeli).

² In keeping with this logic, we indicate the original language of numerous works quoted in the footnotes as "Israeli" rather than "Hebrew."

³ Ahuviya, *Tanakh Ram*, 9.

2. scholars, theoreticians, intellectuals, and government officials who discuss Tanakh Ram in order to express their doctrine that an Israeli version of the Bible is not necessary.

Members of the first group respond positively to Tanakh Ram, expressing authentic experiences, saying that using this edition turns the study of the Bible into an enjoyable and rewarding task. School teachers, pupils and parents express these views in the media and social networks. The fact that Tanakh Ram is a bestseller proves they literally put their money where their mouth is.

Tanakh Ram's widespread distribution is also apparent in the fact that officials at the Israeli Ministry of Education had to address numerous queries by teachers and pupils, asking formal approval to use this edition. The official response by the Ministry of Education was published on June 16, 2010 by Drora Halevi, who was at the time the supervisor of Bible instruction.⁴ Halevi proclaimed that teachers could not expect pupils to purchase Tanakh Ram and added they were not allowed to use these books at school. The fact that the Ministry of Education had to form an official opinion regarding Tanakh Ram proves that it was gaining popularity, filling a troubling gap in Bible study. In February 2011, Zvi Zameret, the pedagogical secretariat chairman at the Ministry of Education, stated that "the Bible teaching situation is deteriorating alarmingly."⁵ He described the situation as "an elimination of the Bible and the Bible teachers."⁶ Zameret put the blame on major cuts of hours allocated to Bible study, as well as on the fact that pupils prefer to use Tanakh Ram, despite what he referred to as "an unequivocal order [to schools] not to use those books."⁷ Zameret further cited Shimshon Shoshani, then Ministry of Education director-general, and stated that Shoshani had said (rhetorically): "Bring me principals [whose schools use Tanakh Ram] and we shall hang them in the city square."⁸ It is quite alarming that three high-ranking officials at the Ministry of Education used a scapegoat, launching an attack on Abraham

⁴ Yairah Amit, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible's Empire in Israeli Education* (Kadima: Reches, 2010), 161 (Israeli).

⁵ Or Kashti, "Ministry official calls Bible studies' decline a 'disaster of biblical proportions,'" *Haaretz*, February 24, 2011, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5127158>.

⁶ Kashti, *Haaretz*.

⁷ Kashti, *Haaretz*.

⁸ Kashti, *Haaretz*.

Ahuviya's book, blaming this retired teacher's enterprise for the ongoing failure of Bible studies in Israel.

3. Tanakh Ram - Academia Reaction

Tanakh Ram was discussed in the Israeli media, as well as at various academic conferences.⁹ These discussions hosted leading academics and intellectuals, such as Yairah Amit, Professor of Biblical Studies and former coordinator of the training program for Bible teachers at Tel Aviv University, Fania Oz-Salzberger professor of History at the University of Haifa, Uzzi Ornan, Israeli linguist, a member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, Yochi Brandes, acclaimed author and scholar, Ghil'ad Zuckermann as well as Zvi Zameret. All the speakers addressed the precarious state of Bible study in Israel. They agreed that the Bible could not be regarded as any other school subject as it is the cultural infrastructure of the Jewish people, as well as of large parts of the world's population. Most speakers considered Tanakh Ram as an obstacle, discouraging pupils from reading the original biblical language. However, Zuckermann argued that the usage of Tanakh Ram could actually help overcoming the prevalent alienation from the study of the Hebrew Bible, typical of Israeli pupils. What is the cause of the conflict between these views?

Tanakh Ram is a translation of the Bible into what Zuckermann calls a high-register Israeli. Its opponents regard such a translation as unnecessary, maintaining that biblical Hebrew is accessible to every Israeli child. This view has repeatedly been expressed by scholars and intellectuals: Aviezer Ravitzky, a prominent scholar of Jewish philosophy, compared the relation between biblical Hebrew and what we call Israeli to the relation between Classical Greek and Modern Greek. Ravitzky argued that whereas Greek was characterized by an unbridgeable gap between these two languages, Hebrew users do not face such a chasm. He wrote the following: "Modern Greek, for example, boasts many similarities to its ancestor, yet a speaker of the current language must

⁹ Some of these conferences were (1) May 19, 2009: Bar-Ilan University, a symposium dedicated to Tanakh Ram and other translations of classical literature. (2) November 28, 2010: Oranim Academic College, a conference dedicated to Tanakh Ram and Bible teaching at Israeli schools. (3) November 30, 2011: Sderot Conference for Society at Sapir Academic College - session entitled "Bible Studies in Israel!" (4) December 18, 2011: Zikhron Yaakov Public Library - a symposium dedicated to Tanakh Ram and cultural meaning of translations.

struggle to read ancient texts. The Modern Hebrew speaker, however, moves smoothly through the Bible.”¹⁰

A similar view was expressed by Asa Kasher in a linguistic discussion:

“If you give an Israeli child a piece of Hebrew-engraved pottery thousands of years old, he would probably read the engraved writing without difficulty and would understand its content to some extent. This remarkable fact is held by many as conclusive evidence testifying to the unique qualities of Hebrew and to the difference between Hebrew and other languages.”¹¹

4. Linguists, biblical Hebrew, and Israeli

Scholars referring to biblical Hebrew and Israeli (Hebrew) as one language are often not linguists, as linguists are well aware of the considerable gap between the two. Chaim Rabin, former professor of Hebrew language at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, stated that the prevailing perception of the connection between the contemporary language and the language of the Bible was just an illusion.¹² Haiim B. Rosén, who won the Israel Prize for linguistics, argued already in 1956 that there was not a single Israeli child who would not feel total alienation towards the biblical language.¹³ But these authoritative linguists did not share their insights with the general public. Rabin noted that he was afraid of the emotional damage the Israeli people might suffer once they realize that they do not actually speak the biblical language. He explained that in his opinion Israelis wanted to believe that they still were using the original ancient language. Rabin openly admitted that he had feared that the bond between the people and their tongue would grow weaker once they realized that they were not using the original biblical language.¹⁴

Rosén did not express this concern, but, similarly, explained the motives of those who did not admit that the biblical language is different from Israeli:

¹⁰ Aviezer Ravitzky, *Religious and Secular Jews in Israel: A Kulturkampf?* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2000), 13–14.

¹¹ Asa Kasher et al., “Ancient Hebrew and Contemporary Hebrew: The Same Language?: Discussion between Linguists.” *Leshonenu La’am* 31, no. 4 (1980): 105–136, here 106 (Israeli).

¹² Chaim Rabin, “What was the Revival of Hebrew Language,” *Linguistic Studies. Collected Papers in Hebrew and Semitic Languages* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1999), 359–76, here 376 (Israeli).

¹³ Haiim B. Rosén, *Our Hebrew: Its Nature from the point of view of Linguistic Methods* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1956) 123. (Israeli).

¹⁴ Rabin, *Revival*, 376.

“They fear that acknowledging the existence of Israeli Hebrew [...] will turn biblical vocabulary and modes to a subject that requires study, and will make access to biblical contents an issue that necessitates prior linguistic training.”¹⁵

Rosén argued against ignoring that problem. He claimed that the bond to the Bible must be cultivated while overcoming a “holy lie,”¹⁶ the lie that Israelis make daily use of biblical Hebrew. With time, many keen Israelis realized that the biblical Isaiah would have not been able to understand them and vice versa. However, it is common to hear an Israeli telling his/her foreign friends that s/he speaks Hebrew, the language of the Hebrew Bible.

Rosén’s important point was put in writing more than sixty years ago. Yet, Israeli children are persistently told that the Hebrew Bible was written in their mother tongue. In other words, in Israeli primary schools, Hebrew and their Israeli mother tongue are axiomatically the very same. Therefore, one cannot expect that Israelis would easily embrace the notion that these two languages might be intrinsically different. We argue, however, that accepting this concept is an essential step for upgrading the Bible teaching in Israel.

5. The Israeli Language

The mother tongue of most Israelis is not Hebrew, but rather a new language that ought to be called “Israeli.” Israeli, somewhat misleadingly known as “Modern Hebrew,” is a fascinating and multifaceted, fin-de-siècle 133 year-old Semito-European hybrid.¹⁷ Its grammar is based simultaneously on “Sleeping Beauty” Hebrew and *máme loshn* Yiddish, the revivalists’ mother tongue, as well as on a plethora of other languages spoken by the founders of Israeli, e. g. Polish, Russian, German, Arabic, and Judeo-Spanish (“Ladino”).¹⁸ Hebrew persisted as an important literary, cultural, and liturgical language over the centuries and greatly influenced Israeli. Israeli morphological forms and its basic vocabulary are mainly – albeit not exclusively – Semitic. On the other hand, the patterns of the language (phonetics, phonology, syntax, modes of discourse, semantics, associations, connotations) – not to say (as it is

¹⁵ Rosén, *Hebrew*, 123.

¹⁶ Rosén, *Hebrew*, 124.

¹⁷ We consider Itamar Ben-Avi (1882–1943), Eliezer Ben-Yehuda’s son, to be symbolically the first speaker of Israeli. Given that he began to speak at age of 4, in 1886, the Israeli language is 133 years old.

¹⁸ Zuckermann, *Israeli – A Beautiful Language* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008), 46–47 (Israeli).

unquantifiable, unmeasurable) its genius, spirit, mindset, *Weltanschauung* – of the Israeli language are mostly European.¹⁹ Thus, Israeli is a phoenix (Hebrew rising from the ashes) - cuckoo (Yiddish laying its eggs in another nest) cross, both Semitic and Indo-European. Both Hebrew and Yiddish act as its primary contributors, accompanied by an array of secondary contributors. Israeli is not only multi-layered and multi-registered, but also multi-sourced (draws from many different languages). The Zionist enterprise has consciously reclaimed an ancient language that fell asleep as a mother tongue in the 2nd century CE. 1750 years later it was brought back to life by charismatic political activists, such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), who resurrected it while using – often inadvertently, subconsciously – their own mother tongues.

In his 1957 book, *Hebrew – The Eternal Language*, Hebrew grammarian William Chomsky argued: “It may be safely assumed that there were always somewhere in the world, especially in Eretz Yisrael, individuals or even groups, who could and did employ the Hebrew language effectively in oral usage.”²⁰

But Chomsky – just like Haramati²¹ – is misleading. It is true that, throughout its *literary* history, Hebrew was used as an occasional *lingua franca* in the Jewish diaspora. However, between the second and nineteenth centuries it was no one’s mother tongue. William’s son Noam Chomsky implies, the development of a literary language is very different from that of a fully-fledged native language.²²

But there are many linguists who, though rejecting the “eternal spoken Hebrew mythology,” still explain every linguistic feature in Israeli as if Hebrew never died. For example, Goldenberg suggests that Israeli pronunciation originates from internal convergence and divergence within Hebrew.²³

We wonder, however, how a literary “Sleeping Beauty” (i. e. as dead as a dodo as a spoken mother tongue) can be subject to the same *phonetic* and

¹⁹ Zuckermann, *Israeli*, 84–119.

²⁰ William Chomsky, *The Eternal Language* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1957), 218.

²¹ Shlomo Haramati, *Living Hebrew throughout the Generations* (Rishon LeZion: Masada, 1992, Israeli). Shlomo Haramati, *Hebrew – A Spoken Language* (Tel Aviv: Misrad HaBitahon, 2000, Israeli).

²² Ghil’ad Zuckermann, *Revivalistics, Cross-Fertilization and Wellbeing: Awakening Hebrew and Other Sleeping Beauty Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, in print).

²³ Gideon Goldenberg, “Hebrew as a Living Semitic Language,” in *Evolution and Renewal: Trends in the Development of the Hebrew Language*, ed. Joshua Blau (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1996), 148–190, here 151–158 (Israeli).

phonological processes (rather than analyses) as a mother tongue? We argue, rather, that the Israeli sound system continues the (strikingly similar) phonetics and phonology of Yiddish, the native language of almost all the fin-de-siècle revivalists. These revivalists very much wished to speak Hebrew, with Semitic grammar and pronunciation, like Arabs. However, they could not avoid the Ashkenazic sociolinguistic mindset – and consonants – arising from their European background.

The formation of Israeli was *not* the result of language contact between Hebrew and a prestigious, powerful superstratum – such as English in the case of Arabic, or Kurdish in the case of Neo-Aramaic. Rather, *ab initio*, Israeli had two primary contributors: Yiddish and Hebrew. Whereas Kurdish is a *superstratum* of Neo-Aramaic, Yiddish is a *primary contributor* to Israeli. The two cases are, therefore, not parallel.

It is intriguing, therefore, that too many Hebrew linguists force such a parallelism in their ipse dixitisms, turning a scholarly blind eye to the distinct language histories, failing to distinguish between the fundamental realms of linguistic typology and linguistic genetics.

Those considering Hebrew and Israeli as one and the same language often relate to Hebrew revival as a miraculous phenomenon. Shlomo Carmi studied this issue and reached the following conclusion: “An in-depth review of the research literature reveals that many refer to a miracle – a metaphysical and meta-historical category – a central significance in the process of resuscitating Hebrew.”²⁴

Evidently, this is due to the fact that no rational analysis can ever explain a process in which a dead language is revived, and the revived language is identical to the dead one. However, all who espouse these views fully understand that the settlement of the land of Israel by Jews throughout the 19th–20th centuries was a historical process, prolonged and complex, caused by multifold reasons, factors, and motivations. The same analysis is valid as to characterizing the way in which the Israeli language was formed.

As aforementioned, the Israeli public is misled to believe that fluency in Israeli enables one to understand biblical Hebrew. Yet, Israeli speakers are

²⁴ Shlomo Karmi, *One People One Language: The Revival of the Hebrew Language in an in an Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Ra'anana: Misrad Ha-Bitahon, 1997), 268 (Our translation from Israeli to English).

well aware of the fact that the biblical language includes obscure vocabulary. However, most Israeli Bible readers do not fathom that many common Israeli lexical items originating in the Bible bear entirely different meaning in biblical Hebrew.

Chaim Cohen, professor of Hebrew Language and Bible at the Ben Gurion University and a devoted disciple of Moshe Held (1924–1984), addressed this phenomenon. He explained that certain words in the Hebrew Bible are used in Israeli in a way that reflects a complete misinterpretation. Indeed, modern usage of biblical vocabulary is often based on a frequent, yet erroneous, interpretation of biblical Hebrew.²⁵ Cohen authored several studies confirming this point.²⁶ His careful analysis of the biblical vocabulary illustrated the extent to which the language of the Bible is incomprehensible to modern Israelis.²⁷ It seems that, by and large, Israelis believe that they understand the Bible, whereas actually their interpretation derives from their Israeli mother tongue, and thus is inadequate, invalid, and flawed. Eliezer Rubinstein wrote in this respect:

“It is true that we are familiar with most biblical words. However, there is a huge difference in the way they are used. Frequently, speakers feel the difference and consult reference books in order to understand the text. But often we do not notice that there is a difference, and attribute to Biblical words that which is not in them, according to the way they are understood nowadays.”²⁸

Tanakh Ram is most useful in dealing with this problem. As it presents the biblical Hebrew text and its translation into Israeli side by side, the readers get the Israeli version of every Hebrew word, including those words that they would normally assume did not require explanation, as they are often used in Israeli.

²⁵ Chaim Cohen, “More ‘faux ami amis:’ Meanings of Common Modern Hebrew Words that Originated by Mistake.” *Mech’karim Belashon [Linguistic studies]* 11–12 (2008), 173–197, here 173 (Israeli).

²⁶ Cf. Cohen, “More ‘faux ami amis,’” 195–196.

²⁷ Cf. Ghil’ad Zuckermann and Gitit Holzman, “Let my People Know!: Towards a Revolution in the Teaching of the Hebrew Bible,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 226 (2014) (special issue Jewish Language Contact) 57–82, here 70–73.

²⁸ Kasher et al., *Ancient Hebrew*, 119–120 (Our translation from Israeli to English).

Tanakh Ram is not flawless, as its critics meticulously observe.²⁹ Indeed, any cultural project conducted by a single person cannot fully meet the expectations of a wide and varied public. Nevertheless, as it transmits the biblical language to the linguistic sphere prevailing in 21st-century Israel, it provides Israelis with a significant key for unsealing their ancient treasures.

6. Bible Teaching in Israel in the 21st Century

As noted above, linguists are well aware of the essential gap between Hebrew and Israeli, whilst many who are not professional linguists continue to ignore it. We explained that the public response to Tanakh Ram consists of two main categories:

- A. Comments expressed by people who make frequent use of the book and therefore reflect a reliable and direct impression of its characteristics;
- B. Opinions voiced by people who do not use the book regularly, but discuss it in order to express a fundamental position against any modern translation of the Bible.

We shall now further particularize this distinction, focusing on Bible teaching in Israel in the 21st century. People expressing the first view, mainly Bible teachers and pupils, realize Tanakh Ram's considerable contribution to understanding the language of the Bible, its themes and concepts. By and large, opponents to the endorsement of Tanakh Ram are those advocating the importance of teaching the Hebrew Bible but do not actually teach it themselves.

Yairah Amit, professor of Biblical Studies and former teacher and coordinator of the training program for teachers of the Bible at the School of Education at Tel Aviv University, examined why Israeli pupils showed no interest in studying Bible and indeed had hardly any knowledge of the Bible.³⁰ Amit criticized the thesis presented in our previous study, namely that the Bible is written in language that ought to be considered foreign to native Israeli speakers, and that fact must be taken into consideration when teaching the Hebrew Bible to Israelis.³¹

²⁹ Lea Mazor, "On translating Bible to Contemporary Hebrew," *Beit Mikra, Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World* 54, no. 1 (2009) 126–166.

³⁰ Yairah Amit, "Fun Bible," *Gilui-Daat* 2 (2012): 171–176 (Israeli).

³¹ Zuckermann and Holzman, "Let my People Know," 66–74.

That said, Amit did not ignore the linguistic difficulty inherent in Israelis reading the Bible. Nevertheless, in her opinion the linguistic gap between biblical Hebrew and Israeli should not be openly discussed with school children. She maintained that as pupils tend to avoid studying foreign languages, once told that the Bible was written in a foreign language, they would refrain from studying it altogether.³²

Amit offered another tactic to address this difficulty: teaching biblical Hebrew at kindergarten, “at the age at which languages are more easily assimilated.”³³ In other words, Amit actually acknowledged that the biblical language is foreign but preferred to conceal this significant factor from Israeli students. She relied on the pretext that labeling of the language as foreign would intimidate students. Regardless, however, native Israeli speakers do feel that the biblical language is incomprehensible. They are reluctant to study the Bible once they realize that they are required to accomplish a task they were never equipped for.

As mentioned, Amit proposed transferring the study of the biblical language to a young age, thus adopting a well-known linguistic insight, according to which languages are acquired intuitively and optimally at these ages. In her words lies a revolutionary proposal: the transformation of biblical Hebrew, which is a foreign language for Israeli speakers, into another mother tongue for Israeli children. But the very same method was already tested by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and the other Hebrew language revivalists. And the outcome of their efforts was Israeli, a stratified and multi-parental language. Just like any other revival language, Israeli is a hybrid *ab initio*.³⁴

Amit discussed several problems causing Bible to be “a difficult and complex profession for teaching.”³⁵ One of these problems is the biblical language:

“The language of the Bible has become a foreign language for learners. The different syntax and vocabulary, some of which are not in use today, create alienation and distance [...] Tanakh Ram was published recently [...] intending to serve as a mediator between Modern Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew. The very fact of its publication

³² Amit, “Fun Bible,” 172 (Our translation from Israeli to English).

³³ Amit, “Fun Bible,” 172.

³⁴ Cf. Ghil’ad Zuckermann, “Hybridity versus Revivability: Multiple Causation, Forms and Patterns,” *Journal of Language Contact Varia* 2 (2009) 40–67.

³⁵ Amit, *Rise and Fall*, 11 (Our translation from Israeli to English).

serves as a clear proof of the growing distance from Biblical language and the necessity of a mediation.”³⁶

Amit stated that “Bible teaching in Israeli school is a complete failure.”³⁷ She is undoubtedly right, hence acknowledging the fact that biblical language is a foreign language for Israeli speakers is a necessary condition to start coping with this issue.

Scholars Asher Shkedi and Iris Yaniv conducted lengthy and in-depth interviews with Bible teachers in Israel. Shkedi listed several difficulties reported by teachers and concluded that teachers believed that the biblical language was the greatest difficulty facing their students.³⁸ Yaniv’s dissertation discussed the crisis in Bible teaching in Israel.³⁹ She enumerated various reasons causing this crisis, pointing among others at the obscure biblical language. School teachers quoted in this dissertation explain that the difficulties met by pupils stem from the fact the Bible is actually written in a foreign language, whereas the pupils are told that it was written in their mother tongue. Thus, the students become extremely frustrated, not being able to understand what they read.⁴⁰

7. Myth and Reality: Teaching Bible in Israel in the 20th Century

The catastrophic condition of Bible studies in Israel is common knowledge. Many depict an idealistic, nostalgic era in which Israeli youth explored the land embracing the books of the Bible, reading it delightfully, pursuing its ideas, and fully understanding its language. Contemporary intellectuals rebuke Israeli teenagers, whose reluctance to study the Bible seems to reflect negligence, linguistic incompetence, and aversion towards humanities. However, it should be pointed out that Bible teaching was problematical *ab initio*, for decades. In 1953, Bible teacher Meir Bloch wrote:

³⁶ Amit, *Rise and Fall*, 12.

³⁷ Amit, “Fun Bible,” 173.

³⁸ Asher Shkedi, “The Teacher as Mediator in Jewish Text Teaching”, *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 12 (1997): 201–210, here 207.

³⁹ Iris Yaniv, “From Alienation to Dialogue: Teaching Bible in Non-Religious Jewish Israeli Secondary Education” (Ph.D. diss., University of Haifa, 2010, Israeli).

⁴⁰ Yaniv, “From Alienation to Dialogue,” 87–95.

“The Bible is not appreciated by Israeli youth. They never study it or read it for their own pleasure. At most, they deal with it in order to pass the matriculation examinations. This state of affairs requires deliberation: What is the origin of that crisis? And what might be the way to remedy the situation?”⁴¹

Bloch raised several more questions that can and indeed should be discussed at any gathering of present-day Bible teachers: “Which ideas and principles form the foundation of biblical teaching so far? What might be the reasons for that failure? What is the state of the profession today? [...] Which way shall we turn?”⁴²

These honest and painful questions attest that Bible studies have been in a state of continuous crisis for decades. The Ministry of Education has recently warned of further deterioration in Bible teaching due to budget cuts. Yet, there has never been a golden age for Bible studies at Israeli schools. From the fin-de-siècle days of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda’s son Itamar Ben-Avi until the 21st century, the mother tongue of Israeli children has been Israeli, not Hebrew. Consequently, Israeli children lack the skills required to understand the Bible smoothly. It is essential to take full measures to help them do so.

The respectable Israeli version of the Bible prepared by Abraham Ahuviya was created in order to provide a solution to an acute problem of Bible teaching, and it does seem to meet the needs of students, teachers and the general Israeli public. Reading Tanakh Ram could arouse affection for the Bible, as well as ambition to study its original language too.

8. The Benefits of Tanakh Ram

The biblical tradition played a significant role in the spiritual and practical life of the Jewish people throughout the ages, and continues to do so within the Zionist movement, being employed and referred to by Israeli Prime Ministers from David Ben-Gurion until the current administration. That is why a precise understanding of biblical Hebrew is important. We believe that Israelis *should* be able to understand the Bible, and therefore support the meticulous study of the biblical language.

⁴¹ Anita Shapira, *The Hebrew Bible and Israeli Identity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), 114 (Israeli).

⁴² Shapira, *Hebrew Bible*, 114.

Following this train of thought, Tanakh Ram is a useful tool for this very reason. Consider Genesis 1:1, where God creates שמים וארץ (pronounced in Israeli as *shamáim va'árets*), known as “the heavens and the earth” (King James Version). In fact, this is a *merism* whose reference is *not* “sky and earth” but rather “the entire universe.” Tanakh Ram appropriately translates it as העולם (*haolám*), which an Israeli speaker would understand as “the world.”

Merism is a linguistic phenomenon characteristic of biblical Hebrew in which a combination of two *contrasting parts* of the whole refers to the whole.⁴³ Other famous examples of biblical merisms are Genesis 1:5, where “evening” and “morning” refer to “one day;” and Psalm 139, where the psalmist declares that God knows “my downsitting and my uprising,” i. e. God knows *all* the psalmist’s actions.

As here, Tanakh Ram often provides good translations into Israeli. Consider the following examples:

GENESIS 1:2

Whilst an Israeli speaker understands תהו ובהו (*tóu vavóu*) as “mess, chaos, *balagán*,” it actually means almost the opposite: “emptiness, nothing” (note that in order to create mess, one has to have some things). The translation of Tanakh Ram is שוממה וריקה (*shomemá vereyká*), which an Israeli speaker would understand, appropriately, as “empty.”

PROVERBS 7:7

<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
וְרָאִיתִי אֶת הַפְתָּאִים, הַתְּבוֹנְנֹתַי בְּבָנִים, בְּנֵעַר הָחַסַּר תְּבוּנָה.	וְאָרָא בַּפְתָּאִים אֲבִינָה בְּבָנִים נֵעַר הָחַסַּר-לֵב.

Whilst an Israeli speaker understands חָסַר-לֵב (*hasár lev*) as “cruel,” it actually means “stupid,” since in Hebrew the heart is where thoughts are placed, not feelings. The translation of Tanakh Ram is חסר תבונה (*hasár tvuná*), which an Israeli speaker would understand, appropriately, as “stupid.”

⁴³ Cf. Alexander M. Honeyman, “Merismus in Biblical Hebrew,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 71, no. 1 (1952): 11–18.

ISALAH 11:9	
<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
בְּכַל הָרָקְדָשִׁי – בְּכַל אֲרֻצֵּי – לֹא יִשְׁחִיתוּ, לֹא יַעֲשׂוּ שׁוּם רָע. כִּי יִדְעֵת ה' תְּמַלֵּא אֶת הָאָרֶץ, כִּמוֹ הַמַּיִם הַמְכֹּסִים אֶת הַיָּם.	לֹא-יִרְעוּ וְלֹא-יִשְׁחִיתוּ בְּכָל-הָרָקְדָשִׁי כִּי-תִמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ דְּעַתְּ אֶת-יְהוָה כַּמַּיִם לַיָּם מְכֹסִים:

Whilst an Israeli speaker understands *דְּעַת* (*deá*) as “opinion,” i.e. “*subjective* knowledge,” its actual biblical meaning is “*objective* knowledge.” The translation of Tanakh Ram is *יִדְעַת* (*yediá*), which an Israeli speaker would understand, appropriately, as “objective knowledge.”

JUDGES 7:13	
<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
וַיִּגְדַּעוֹן בָּא אֵל הַעַמֻּדָה, וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ מִסֹּפֶר לְחִבְרוֹ חִלּוֹם וְאוֹמֵר: “חִלְמַתִּי חִלּוֹם, שְׁלָחֶם שְׁעוּרִים צְלוּיִם עַל גְּחָלִים מִתְּהַפֵּךְ-מִתְגַּלְגֵּל בְּמַחְנֵה מַדִּינָה, מִגִּיעַ עַד לְאֵהָל, מִתְנַגֵּשׁ בּוֹ וְנֹפֵל; וְהָאֵהָל הִתְהַפֵּךְ וְנֹפֵל.”	וַיִּבֹא גִדְעוֹן וְהִנֵּה-אִישׁ, מִסֹּפֶר לְרַעְהוּ חִלּוֹם; וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה חִלּוֹם חִלְמַתִּי, וְהִנֵּה צְלִיל לֶחֶם שְׁעוּרִים מִתְּהַפֵּךְ בְּמַחְנֵה מַדִּינָה, וַיִּבֹא עַד-הָאֵהָל וַיִּפְּחוּ וַיִּפֹּל וַיִּהְפַּכְהוּ לְמַעְלָה, וְנֹפֵל הָאֵהָל.

Whilst an Israeli speaker understands *צְלִיל* (*tslil*) as “sound,” its actual biblical meaning is “bread”. The translation of Tanakh Ram is appropriate, as following.

EXODUS 29:18	
<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
וַתְּשַׂרְף אֶת כָּל הָאֵיל עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ; הוּא קֶרֶבֶן עוֹלָה לַה'; הוּא רֵיחַ גִּיחֹחַ, רֵיחַ נְעִים, קֶרֶבֶן הָעוֹלָה בָּאֵשׁ לַח'.	וְהִקְטַרְתָּ אֶת-כָּל-הָאֵיל הַמִּזְבֵּחַהּ, עֹלָה הוּא לַיהוָה; רֵיחַ גִּיחֹחַ, אֲשֶׁה לַיהוָה הוּא.

Whilst an Israeli speaker understands *גִּיחֹחַ* (*nihóakh*) as “good smell,” its actual biblical meaning is “giving pleasure.” The translation of Tanakh Ram, *נְעִים* (*naím*), is appropriate, as it is understood by the Israeli speaker as “pleasant”.

NUMBERS 1:3	
<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
<p>כל הגברים מגיל עשרים ומעלה – הוא הגיל של כל חיב גיוס בישראל – אתה ואהרן תספרו אותם לפי השתיכותם לצבאות של שבטיהם.</p>	<p>מבן עשרים שנה ומעלה, כל יצא צבא בישראל תפקדו אתם לצבאתם, אתה ואהרן.</p>

Whilst an Israeli speaker understands *יוצא צבא* (*yotsé tsavá*) as “former soldier,” its actual biblical meaning is the opposite: “someone who is about to join the army.” The translation of Tanakh Ram, *חייב גיוס* (*khayáv giús*) is appropriate, as it is understood by the Israeli speaker as “people required to join the army.”

9. Improvements Needed for Tanakh Ram

Sometimes, Tanakh Ram fails to provide a proper translation. Consider the following:

GENESIS 43:11	
<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
<p>בסוף אמר להם ישראל אביהם: אם כן, זאת עשו: קחו אתכם מיבול הארץ, והביאו לאיש מתנה: מעט צרי ומעט דבש, ושקדים. נכאת ולט, בטנים</p>	<p>ויאמר אליהם ישראל אביהם, אם-כן אפוא זאת עשו – קחו מזמרת הארץ בכליכם, והורידו לאיש מנחה: מעט צרי, ומעט דבש, נכאת ולט, בטנים ושקדים.</p>

Whilst an Israeli speaker understands *בטנים* (*botnīm*) as “peanuts,” it actually refers to a type of fruit, but not to peanuts. The translation of Tanakh Ram is flawed as it leaves it as *botnīm*.

LEVITICUS 13:49

The biblical Hebrew lexical item *ירקרק* (*yerakrāk*) is not “weak green” but rather “strong green.” Here, Tanakh Ram fails as it repeats *ירקרק* rather than translating it into *מאוד ירוק* (*yarók meód*) “very green.”

JUDGES 16:29	
<i>Tanakh Ram</i>	<i>Tanakh</i>
<p>וּשְׁמֹשׁוֹן אָחַז בְּכֹחַ אֵת שְׁנֵי הָעַמּוּדִים הָאֲמֻצְעִים שֶׁהָבִית עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם, וְנָשַׁעַן עֲלֵיהֶם, עֹמֵד אֶחָד בִּימִינוֹ וְאֶחָד בְּשִׁמְאֵלוֹ</p>	<p>וַיִּלְפַּת שְׁמֹשׁוֹן אֶת-שְׁנֵי עַמּוּדֵי הַתְּנֹךְ, אֲשֶׁר הָבִית נִכּוֹן עֲלֵיהֶם, וַיִּסְמְךְ, עֲלֵיהֶם-- אֶחָד בִּימִינוֹ, וְאֶחָד בְּשִׁמְאֵלוֹ.</p>

The Hebrew lexical item לָפַת (*lafât*) (see e.g. וַיִּלְפַּת [vayil'pot] in Judges 15:29) is “touch gently” (see Cohen above) rather than “grope strongly” as Tanakh Ram, Israeli speakers, and even the leading biblical scholar Professor Yair Zakovitch (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) misunderstand it.

10. Concluding Remarks: Bible Teaching and Negation of the Diaspora

Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg, known by his pen name Ahad Ha-Am (1856–1927), was one of the foremost pre-state Zionist thinkers. In 1911 he travelled to *Eretz Israel* and made a visit to the Herzliya Gymnasium, the first Hebrew high school founded in Jaffa in 1905. In 1912 Ginsberg published in London an essay summarizing his thoughts following this visit.⁴⁴ Ginsberg made some important comments regarding his impressions of several Bible classes he had attended. He paid tribute to the committed teachers but did not fail to notice major difficulties encountered by the students. Ginsberg was under the impression that the students were confused, did not really understand the biblical language, and were indoctrinated to believe that they were immediate descendants of major biblical figures.

Ginsberg explained that Zionist passionate teachers were eager to let their students connect with the ancient eras of the sovereign Israeli kingdom. They accentuated the possible linkages between the glorious past and the challenging present, encouraging the students to believe that they would overcome difficulties just as David, Solomon, and other heroic figures have done. Ginsberg, a dominant spokesperson of diaspora Jewry, felt that teachers imposed a fabricated narrative on naive students. Being enthusiastic Zionists, the Gymnasium pedagogues were keen to ignore 2000 years of tortuous,

⁴⁴ Asher Z. Ginsberg, “Jaffa Hebrew Gymnasium”, Ahad Ha’am Collected Studies (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1956), 649–659.

complex diasporic Jewish continuation. In fact, however, 20th-century Jewish youth were successors of complex, fascinating multifaceted Jewish traditions in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. Therefore, they could have never naturally jumped into biblical figures' shoes, as they were expected to do by their enthusiastic teachers.

Ginsberg was not a linguist and he did not elaborate on the linguistic difficulties. That said, his poignant remarks ought to be taken into consideration in the linguistic context, too: the main problem in Bible teaching in Israel during the 20th and 21st centuries lies in *shlilat hagolah*, the negation of the Diaspora. This negation is manifested both in the forced overpassing of 2,000 years of history in the search of biblical ancientness, and in turning a blind eye to the fact that the biblical language is very different from the Israeli tongue, which was shaped by the *diasporic* Yiddish language.

Ignoring the fact that Israeli is a fascinating and multifaceted, fin-de-siècle 133 year-old Semito-European hybrid language – distinct in a plethora of respects from biblical Hebrew – presents insurmountable obstacles to Israeli pupils, and indeed to the entire Israeli public.

We believe that Israelis *ought* to fathom the biblical narrative – for cultural, historical reasons. They won't succeed in doing so unless the Israeli establishment ceases to be self-righteous and starts teaching the Hebrew Bible using the most advanced, modern techniques of foreign language learning. Tanakh Ram is one of the tools that should be embraced.