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Hebrew as a Gendered Language and an Oppressive Mechanism against Women in the Israeli Society

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HEBREW AS A GENDERED LANGUAGE AND AN

OPPRESSIVE MECHANISM AGAINST WOMEN IN THE

ISRAELI SOCIETY

by

ROTEM ITZHAKY

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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Rotem Itzhaky

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

HEBREW AS A GENDERED LANGUAGE AND AN
OPPRESSIVE MECHANISM AGAINST WOMEN IN THE
ISRAELI SOCIETY

by

Rotem Itzhaky

Advisor: Professor Karen Miller

Wherever you look, whether reading a textbook, scrolling through wanted ads, looking at job requirements, or just watching the news on the television – the effects of the gendered nature of Hebrew are noticeable everywhere. For many years I have been fascinated by the fact that Hebrew is a gendered language in a way that promotes patriarchy by using the unmarked masculine form of words as a default. Some claim that the language as we know it today is neutral, and not discriminatory, while others, including women which interviews you can find in this paper, do not experience it as a neutral language. In fact, the way that the language is structured makes them feel excluded and make them experience a world that is male dominated.

In this thesis paper, I am looking at Hebrew in its two main variations, Ancient (or biblical) Hebrew and Modern Hebrew. Chapter 1 explores the first stories ever told in the Jewish Torah – the creation of Adam and Eve, and the untold story of Adam's first wife – Lilith, in a search for possible explanations as to why Hebrew has developed as a gendered language. Later, I explore the revival of the Hebrew language, a linguistic, social, and a bit of a political event that dates back to the late 19th century and considered until today as a special and rare one, as I am trying to find more reasons as to why Hebrew stayed so gendered even when it had to be developed. My research will also focus on the involvement and importance women had in the revival of Hebrew, if any. By that, I am looking for any patterns of this gendering that can infer on social processes (men's superiority over women for generations and to this day). There is also an extensive review of modern Hebrew, while it also looks at the intersections of feminism, gender, linguistics, and the way they interact. In chapter 4, I explore the Modern Hebrew as it is used today, still being a gendered and oppressive language. I do so partly by analyzing interviews I made with native Hebrew-speaking women.

It is my hope to inspire a conversation about this issue and the need for a change of Hebrew in order to promote a more inclusive society in Israel and other large Hebrew-speaking communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

as sometimes everything I said about this paper sounded like gibberish.

Last but not least – my advisor, Karen Miller, who I met in my first semester at the Graduate Center, who have ALWAYS been there for me, not only for the purpose of this thesis or the classes I was honored to take with her. When others refused to advise me on this thesis, Karen saw the potential in it and helped me push myself and make the best that I can out of this paper, realizing how passionate I am about this subject. I appreciate the time and space you have giving me, and for inspiring me through this process and the rest of my degree.

Many of my friends and colleagues found this "Corona period" as a productive one, something that I was not privileged enough to experience. I cannot wait for the Covid-19 crisis to be over, so I can celebrate this meaningful moment in my academic and personal life and be able to think of where I am going next with this, as I think this paper is the beginning of something bigger, at least for me. Another important thank you - to the many women before me, who fought hard and paved the way for me to be here today, doing what I love, while understanding the fight is not over. And so, this last line is dedicated to me, as I am now aware of the ways in which I push myself through many challenges and crises and was still able to see the end of this project and be very proud of it.

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INTRODUCTION

A year ago, I had the honor and privilege to attend Shabbat dinner with Kate Bornstein, at the 92Y in New York. Bornstein, an American gender theorist, actress and author, had me captivated with her many writings about gender, while she is trying to convince the world that gender is not a binary of either/or, but neither/nor. Before going to that dinner, I figured that it will be like any another Shabbat dinner, but in a much more reform way, that will not put an emphasis on gender roles as prescribed by the Jewish tradition. Standard Jewish religious rituals were performed, each of them meant to be perform by either a man or a woman, because according to most interpretations and traditions of the Jewish Mitzvahs that was God's intent. As I knew it was a Pride Shabbat dinner[1], I expected the transgender woman (which was also a rabbi) who hosted the event to try and challenge the gender roles of the Jewish religion by reversing the roles of each ritual. Oy Vey, unfortunately I was wrong. As is customary in the Jewish tradition, women are usually the ones to light the candles on Friday evening, right before Shabbat, at a specific time that depends on the time the sun sets. At least two candles should be lit, although some interpretations say that a single woman should only light one candle. This Mitzvah is an interpretation of "And God blessed the seventh day" (Genesis: 2-3), as he blessed it with light. The blessing over the bread is performed by a man, and it is called Hamotzi (המוציא), as well as the Kiddush – the blessing over the wine. It is a declaration of the holiness of Shabbat. This is only one example of the gendered practices of Judaism in present day. In this Shabbat dinner, the lightning of the candles was performed by a woman (in that case me), and the blessing on the bread was performed

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[1] Pride Shabbat dinner was a part of pride events hosted at the 92Y, trying to bring Jewish and non-Jewish together in a queer inclusive environment.

by a man (which was himself another rabbi). This has been the Jewish custom in the past almost 4000 years and I guess it is not going to change any time soon. The reason I am using this story, is to try and shed some light on the Jewish tradition, as I will later use this tradition in order to explore the origins of the Hebrew language, as one of the most gendered languages.

The first time I have noticed the fact that Hebrew is gendered in a way that affects me, was when I moved to the US. As I was hearing and reading English as never before, I started to notice the way I translate English to Hebrew – almost always to a masculine form of words. This was a moment of enlightenment, when I started asking more questions about my mother-tongue. The way I see Hebrew today, is as a gendered language in a way that promotes patriarchy. Some will claim that the language as we know it today is neutral, or that it is not discriminatory, while others, including women which interviews you can find later in chapter 4, do not experience it as a neutral language. In fact, the way that the language is structured makes them feel excluded and make them experience a world that is male dominated. I also see Hebrew as a language that is discriminatory, and which leads to what Anne Pauwels calls linguistic sexism (555).

For the purpose of this research, I am looking at Hebrew in its two main variations - Ancient (or biblical) Hebrew and Modern Hebrew. In doing so, in chapter 1 I am going back to the first stories ever told in the Jewish Torah, and presumably in Hebrew – the creation of Adam and Eve, and the untold story of Adam's first wife – Lilith, in a search for possible explanations as to why Hebrew has developed as a gendered language. Chapter 2 explores the revival of the Hebrew language - a linguistic, social, and a bit of a political event that dates back to the late 19th century and considered until today as a special and rare one, trying to find even more reasons as to why Hebrew stayed as gendered as it is, even while it was developing and reinvented. My research is also focusing on the involvement and importance women had in the revival of Hebrew, if any, as I was growing up learning exclusively about male figures who were part of this process. By that, I

am looking for any patterns or influences of this gendering that can infer on social processes (men's superiority over women for generations and to this day). Chapter 3 gives an extensive review of modern Hebrew, while it also looks at the intersections of feminism, gender, linguistics, and the way they interact. In chapter 4, I am looking at Modern Hebrew as it is used today, still being a gendered and oppressive language. I do so partly by conducting interviews with native Hebrew-speaking women. In this chapter I am hoping to show how the use of Hebrew in speech and writing is essentially reinforcing gender norms and roles, that keeps a system of oppression over women, as it is creating systems of oppression in the Hebrew-speaking Israeli society today.

Chapter 1 - In The Beginning

A history of a language can be hard to trace, as most languages exists for thousands of years, and we might miss evidence as to its origins. Although in the past 40 years massive research has been done in this field, there is still not enough evidence and no firm explanations as to how and why a language has evolved (Hauser et al. 401). Christiansen also believes that although there is some advance, we still know relatively little about the origin and evolution of a language (2). As the task might be challenging for most, if not all languages, so is the case for Hebrew. Many arguments exist around when Hebrew was originated. If one choose to look at the story of The Tower of Babel (The Bible, Gen. 11:1), it is said that "Now the whole earth had one language and a common speech", but only until the construction of the Tower of Babel took place, which thereafter God confused all languages and by that all mankind (Unger 52). According to Professor Gershon Galil from The University of Haifa, based on inscription found in Jerusalem in 2012, the earliest writings in Hebrew can be dated back to the 10th century BCE (the time when King David ruled), and if it is in fact true, it means that the Bible was actually written around that time (21).

The first extensive evidence for ancient written Hebrew can be considered to exist in the Jewish Bible, the Torah, which consists of the first five books of the Bible. Schniedewind writes that "in the Jewish tradition, the origins of Hebrew were decidedly sacred. Already by the late Second Temple period, Hebrew was understood to be the language of creation. It was the holy tongue" (27). Furthermore, "in the rabbinic tradition, the Hebrew script itself would trace its origins to creation" (Schniedewind 28). The Hebrew that was used to write that story of creation and later all five books of the Torah, is referred to as the Biblical Hebrew. If we assume that in fact the first written language we can use as an evidence is presented in the Bible, then it is interesting to look at the language written in it, and try to better understand the way it was shaped then, and by

that infer on the way the Hebrew language is constructed today, in its modern form. The greatest debate about the Bible to this day is who is/are the author/s of it? Where was it written? And more importantly – when? According to Moshe Florentin, "We do not have an exact idea who was/were the author/s of those compositions, when and where exactly they operated and what exactly were the sources which they based their writings", however, "the complex nature of the biblical text has its important advantages" (5).

One may wonder why I am going to use the first stories from the Jewish bible as a way to explain the development of Hebrew as a gendered language. According to Moshe Florentin in *Studies on the Hebrew Language,* "the bible, the twenty-four books of the Old Testament, which is the main source from which we draw on our knowledge about ancient Hebrew" (3). Florentin continues by saying that even though we cannot use the bible as a complete source of knowledge for the language, it still gives a comprehensive idea of the ancient Hebrew. Thus, the creation, or rather invention, of the Hebrew language as a gendered one can be considered as a mechanism of trying to deepen the differences between a man and a woman, just as the creation of Eve as a subordinate woman was meant to glorify Adam and give him power. Language, being the most basic mean of communication in every culture, serves as a way to create and maintain different narratives through generations.

In the pages to follow I would look at the language as it is used to tell the first story ever told – The Story of Creation, as it unfolds the history of humankind (for the ones of us believing that version). It is in great details that we are informed about the creation of the world by God;

א בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ. ב וְהָאָרֶץ, הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ, וְחֹשֶׁךְ, עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם; וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם (בראשית א' 1-2).

"**1** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **2** Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the

waters" (The Bible, Gen. 1: 1-2).

The story of creation gives great details of the way God created the world in six days, while the popular version that the majority of people know is the one in which God is creating the man – Adam - on the sixth day, in God's image. The woman, Eve, appears later in the story, as she is created not in the image of God, like Adam, but from Adam's Rib. At this point, God also granted Adam the authority over all creatures of the land. This narrative was passed on for generations in the same manner, giving great importance to Adam's role, as it situates him as the jewel of the crown, the only figure in the creation of the world that was created in the image of God, and maybe for that reason he is also ruling it all. While this story of Adam's creation is the one that is most frequently recounted, the creation of the world by God is actually told in two different stories in the bible. The outstanding difference between the two stories is the way Adam, and humankind in general - were created, and more importantly – the way Eve was created.

(כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ וְיִרְדּוּ בִדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (כז)וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹקִים ׀ אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹקִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: (כח) וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹקִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹקִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֻׁהָ וּרְדוּ בִּדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (בראשית א', כ"ו-כ"ח)

(26) Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (27) So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (28) God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (The Bible, Gen. 1: 26-28).

In the first story of creation that can be found in the bible, just a few verses after the one cited above, a humankind, or rather a new and distinct creature, is created in the image of God, and in Jewish traditional interpretations, it is common to think that this creature, or Adam, was a hermaphroditic[2] creature. Later, this entity created by God was divided into two separate entities – a man and a woman. If this version was to be the dominant narrative, it is to say that man and woman were equal parts of a person that was created in the image of God. "The question arises whether Jews accepted it as a normal occurrence that God initially created a hermaphrodite which was later separated. Such a separation should result in two people of equal value. This is in stark contrast with the general conviction that Eve was subordinate to Adam" (Mondriaan 759). The gender relation here is of equality, there is no question or equation of power, as power is divided equally between the two, no superiority of one over the other.

For some modern scholars, like Umberto Cassuto and in some rabbinical interpretations, the creation narrative is not actually told in two different ways, but rather follows a certain writing style, that starts with a general statement, followed by a more detailed story – "the first narrative affords a general description of the creation of man with the relevant detail given in the ensuing second narrative" (Cassuto 90). The narrative is the same one, only that the supposed second story provides the reader with more details. In contrast, some scholars view the story of creation as a myth, or allegory, and as such we should explore it not as a religious scripture or a written history, but as a story with a moral message. According to Marcus Borg, "the Genesis stories of creation, the Garden of Eden, the expulsion of Adam and Eve, Cain's murder of Abel, Noah and the flood, and the Tower of Babel are what might be called 'purely metaphorical narratives'. They are not reporting the early history of the earth and humankind; they are not history remembered. Yet, as

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[2] A being that has both female and male sexual characteristic. Today this term is used much less to describe people, as it is offensive, and the use of the term intersex is more prevalent.

metaphorical narratives, they can be profoundly true, even though not literally factual" (Borg 49). If we situate the creation story within Borg's idea, then the two unique creation stories of Adam and Eve can tell us a different story than the one we actually read.

An interesting figure worth mentioning at this point is Lilith, which according to ancient Jewish mythology, was Adam's first wife. Lilith does not appear in the biblical creation stories I describe above. The one and only time we can find Lilith in the Bible is in Isaiah 34:14 – "And desert creatures will meet with hyenas, and goat-demons will call out to each other. There also Liliths will settle, and find for themselves a resting place". According to Rashi (as appears in Sefaria.com), in this context Lilith is a demon with wings, but nothing more. The first time we can find an elaborated accounts of Lilith as Adam's first wife in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira,* a Hebrew and Aramaic composition written between the eighth and tenth centuries CE, comprising three parts (Kosior 114). According to Mondriaan, "These legends portray Lilith in a negative light, while, in modern literature, she is characterized positively and rehabilitated". She goes on by claiming that although Lilith is portrayed in a negative way, today "modern feminist exegesis proffers a modified interpretation of the biblical creation narratives" (1). While Eve can be thought of as an obedient woman (at least until she ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden), Lilith is her antithesis. Lilith plays an important role when considering Eve's subordination to Adam.

While many stories and legends have been told about Lilith, the main narrative is one that can be integrated with the two creation stories. According to Louis Ginzberg in *The Legends of the Jews*, after God created Adam, he created Lilith. Already at the beginning it is said that Adam and Lilith were arguing, mainly because Lilith was insisting on having the same rights as Adam, as they were being created equally. While researching, I was able to find an excerpt from *Ben Sira*, providing an explanation to the equal rights Lilith seeks: "After God created Adam, who was alone, He said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). He then created a woman for Adam, from

the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith began to fight. She said, "I will not lie below," and he said, "I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one." Lilith responded, "We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth." But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Creator: "Sovereign of the universe!" he said, "the woman you gave me has run away." At once, the Holy One, blessed be He, sent these three angels to bring her back. Said the Holy One to Adam, "If she agrees to come back, fine. If not she must permit one hundred of her children to die every day" (From Stern and Mirsky's *Rabbinic Fantasies).* She later called God in its unpronounceable name, and then disappeared. It is then that God creates Eve from Adam's rib, perhaps as a way to make her feel the obligation to be an obedient and docile woman to her man. Today people think of Lilith as a demon with wings that flies around trying to devastate the lives of men. In Jewish rabbinical literature, Lilith is considered as bad as Satan (Ginzberg 65).

Lilith's story suggests that God initially created a woman who was equal to Adam (made independently and from the same material). This is in stark contrast with the general conviction that Eve was subordinate to Adam (Mondriaan 759). It is safe to say that Lilith's story can explain much about the way women are treated in Judaism and Jewish tradition. In a way, Lilith was in fact the first feminist, "an influential, independent and arrogant woman seeking gender equality and taking responsibility for her own decisions. In this, she typifies the modern feminist ideal" (Mondriaan 760). As a result, Lilith was portrayed as a monster, a demon, while on the other hand, Eve is portrayed as subordinate to Adam.

It is said that the transition from the Ancient Hebrew to Modern Hebrew was a slow process that took a few decades. It was used mostly in writing before it became a spoken language, and according to many sources, among them Shlomit Shraybom-Shivtiel and Liora Halperin, the

language was in use for only religious purposes for about 2000 years (between 200-1880).

Although not being used on daily basis, Hebrew was researched by Christian scholars, which were

trying to learn what they called "the original language of humanity" (Halperin 5), a fact that puts an

emphasis the importance of Hebrew as a sacred language, not only to Jewish people. It is at the end

of the 19th century, that Jewish scholars aspired to revive the language, but soon realized that

Hebrew as it was, could not have been used for daily conversations, especially as a result of

developments of technology, science, and even ideology (Shraybom-Shivtiel 32), as its primary use

was for religious purposes, and so many words were missing for a non-religious conversation.

While this chapter tries to suggest the reasons behind the gendered nature of Hebrew, the next

chapter tells the story of the revival of the language, while also looking at women's part in this

important process.

Chapter 2 - The Revival of a Language

The Hebrew language was considered dead for a long period of time, as it was used only for prayers and religious rituals, but not for everyday communication between people. The process of its revival is still considered as one of the most fascinating processes in the linguistic world, as the language was never completely dead, but still needed to be resurrected as a language that could be used widely among a large population, in this case Jewish people, and later the Israeli society as we know it today. In this section I will explore the reasons for the revival of Hebrew, the involvement of women in it, and mostly – if during the revival process of Hebrew, the gendered nature of the language was maintained, or even exaggerated, as we clearly know it was not eliminated. I tend to believe that in the process of the revival of Hebrew, there was some maintenance (as Hebrew was kept gendered to this day), and maybe exaggeration to some extent, in the way Hebrew was gendered, although it is evidently already gendered in its ancient form. In the process of the invention of new words, there is no apparent attempt to change its gendered nature, as the rules of gender were kept. This can be a result of the development and creation of new words and rules of the language. One possible reason for the language being constructed that way, is fact that Hebrew was not only revived, but in many ways invented, therefore instead of changing the narrative, it was maintained and magnified.

Alongside the revival of Hebrew in the late 19th century, another important phenomenon started to gain considerable importance – the emergence of the Zionist movement. The Zionist movement was essentially the nationalist movement of the Jewish people, that advocated for a Jewish state for all Jewish people in the territory that was considered the Holy Land, i.e. Canaan. The movement rose mainly as a response to the antisemitism that emerged in Europe at that time and to the rising popularity of other nationalist movements. Zionists were mainly people from the

Haskalah movement – the Jewish Enlightenment movement. In *Studies on the Hebrew Language*, Shlomit Shraybom-Shivtiel claims that "The emergence of the Zionism at the end of the 19th century – influenced by the ideology of Nationalism which spread all over Europe – produced the need for a national common language for the Jewish people" (31). The Zionist movement is also important as it shaped the Israeli cultural and social institutions as we know them today, "including the construction of "normative" Israeli identity" (Jacobs 19). In addition, Halperin claims that the Haskalah movement was trying to reclaim and recaptures old ideas of purity and holiness, and position it "at the center of universal knowledge" (4).

For many generations the Jewish people had many things in common – religion, tradition, heritage, but there was not a common language to all, as for example Jewish people in Europe spoke different languages according to where they were from, as "the language of the Bible and the other Jewish classical resources, was almost dead. It was the language of the Synagogue where Jews pray and read the Torah but for centuries, Jews had not used it as a spoken language for daily life" (Shraybon-Shivtiel 31). The atmosphere at the end of the 19th century made the Jewish movement realize they need to unite more than ever, and that now they have an opportunity, and even an obligation to shape a Jewish identity, realizing that an important part of it is having one common language (Shraybon-Shivtiel 33). Unfortunately for them, Hebrew was not in daily use for almost 2000 years, and as a result - the language did not develop like other languages did, and the movement found itself confused, with no form of modern Hebrew to use among them. For example, nowhere in the Bible or other religious writings were words available to describe things like a train (*rakevet*) or a newspaper (*iton*), things that were invented/developed in the 19th century. "The historical linguistic situation was complicated since the idea of a national language could not be fulfilled unless it went hand in hand with modernism. In other words, Hebrew had to become not only a common national language but a modern language as well" (Shraybom-Shivtiel 32).

It is the Jewish intellectuals in Europe in the mid-19th century that made the first crucial steps towards the revival of Hebrew as a modern language, as they were "striving to make Hebrew a relevant and up-to-date language, adequate to be used as an appropriate means for their writing needs, they even started the process of neologism" (Shraybon-Shivtiel 32). The idea was to start writing literature in Hebrew and spread it, so the language can be learned by Jewish people. The idea of a spoken Hebrew was still thought of as a dream that will be hard to make come true. But then came the father of modern Hebrew, and the person who eventually made this dream come true – a Zionist man named Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

Eliezer Ben Yehuda (אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן־יְהוּדָה) was born in 1858 in Eastern Europe (Lithuania), and was raised in a Jewish religious Hasidic family. As most Jews back then, he too learned Hebrew at a young age as part of his religious education. His family had hoped for him to become a rabbi, but just like many young Jews at that time in Europe, he became more interested in the secular life, and eventually he joined the Haskalah-Enlightenment movement. As many of the members of the movement, he had the same realization as other Zionists, that what can unite Jewish people around the world is a common language - Hebrew. In the preface to the dictionary he himself created, he wrote "The profession of linguistics was not my favorite and I did not have any passion to compile a dictionary but I see it as an acute necessity for speaking Hebrew". Ben-Yehuda invented also the Hebrew word for the dictionary itself (*millon*, from the word *milla* - word). What he saw differently than others – is the possibility of turning Hebrew into a daily spoken language. Ben-Yehuda moved to Jerusalem in 1881, where he then started his more serious work on the revival of Hebrew, with the goal of implementing Hebrew as a daily used language, both in writing and speech (Shraybom-Shivtiel 33).

Ben Yehuda started by publishing a newspaper in Hebrew, while using the more classical language, at this point I would guess that he did it as a way to get people more familiar with the

language and more curious about it, so that at some point their curiosity would make them want to know it better. It is at this time that members of the Enlightenment movement started to work on new words and definitions for Modern Hebrew. When Ben-Yehuda "could not find a word to express some "modern" notion he invented it by himself; New words for 'office', 'exhibition', 'socks', 'towel', and many others that he invented were published in his paper to be spread among the Jewish people and to be used in daily natural communication" (Shraybon-Shivtiel 33). The idea of using his paper to teach people in Israel Hebrew was a brilliant one, as he was captivating his target audience early while using classical Hebrew, all while developing the language as he learned the needs of it, and then taught his readers the "new" language. Along with creating new language, he also translated many European writings to Hebrew, and by that created another way for people to learn the language, and also gain more opportunities of education. The fact that it was done while many European immigrants arrived at the holy land, helped them in living as a community, while also connecting to their new home and nation – Israel, where they use Hebrew. As I think about it, I believe it helped in creating a sense of community and belonginess.

Although the idea was promising, many people had doubts about how successful it can be and even Ben Yehuda himself had doubts, as he wrote also in the preface of his dictionary - "Coming back to the language of our ancestors is our choice, nobody can prevent us from this if only we want, but is it possible? Is it possible that people will start speaking in all spheres of life a language which they abandoned and stopped using for centuries?". Many people saw it as an unreasonable idea, among them a prominent linguistic at that time – Theodor Noldeke, who wrote about it in *The Encyclopedia Britanica* as "a dream with no prospect of becoming real". Most of the Jewish critics of this ideas claimed that a language that is used for religious purposes, should not become a daily one, as Hebrew is holy. All this did not deter Ben-Yehuda from making his dream come true or stop all his efforts to achieve it.

In 1890 Ben-Yehuda founded the Hebrew Language Committee for the improvement of Hebrew, along with other intellectuals who believed in the idea of the revival of Hebrew, with the goal of improving the language and making it a spoken one. As the language was lacking many words, the committee had to make sure to add new words or modify, whether from the Jewish traditional sources (The Bible, The Mishna), and other words from Semitic languages, like Arabic. This committee, later changed its name and function in 1953 to The Academy of the Hebrew Language, which was established by the Israeli government in 1953, and is a powerful institution in which "new Hebrew words and terms are created, and standards are set for grammar, orthography, transliteration and punctuation are determined. Its flagship endeavor, however, is its work in preserving the Hebrew language and its development through the Historical Dictionary Project[3]".

Another member of the Ben-Yehuda family that had an important role in the revival of Hebrew was Eliezer's son – Ben-Zion Itamar. As Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was so fanatic about the idea of Hebrew, he did not allow anyone to speak to his son in any language but Hebrew. This included Itamar's mother, who could not speak Hebrew so naturally, as her native language was Russian. According to Shlomit Shraybom-Shivtiel, "Itamar is known as the first child in the world who spoke Hebrew as a mother tongue" (36), as his father forced it on him. Later in life he became a journalist and linguistic, and at some point, he even invented a few new words (like the ones for independence, car, cinema).

Women and the Revival of Hebrew

As one reads more about the revival of the Hebrew language, it is very easy to notice the lack of female figures in this process. The fact was that very few women knew Hebrew before its

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[3] The Academy of the Hebrew Language website, https://en.hebrew-academy.org.il.

revival, as the language was used only for religious purposes, and women did not learn the religious scriptures like men did, as they were forbidden from doing so. Women's role was mainly to support the home and take care of the kids, while their husbands provided for the family and study the Torah. Today in Israel, in orthodox communities the situation is very similar, and women are still at home, providing support for their husbands who study religious scriptures. The language became accessible to women only later, with the revival of Hebrew, as it became a daily language. According to Miri Bar-Ziv Levy, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the Hebrew and Jewish Languages department, the existing research did not deal with women's contribution to the revival of the language, and more than that – at some points some scholars claim that women had no contribution to this process at all (76). But was it in fact the case?

Bar-Ziv Levy conversely, claims that the women of the First Aliyah (1882-1903) had a crucial part in the revival of Hebrew, both in private and public spheres, and they helped in laying the grounds for the process of the language's revival. First and foremost, some of these women already knew Hebrew, as they came from liberal homes and they had some knowledge of the language, as they were allowed to take part in religious classes and get further education. As mothers who took care of their children and had a great part in their education, they were able to teach Hebrew, and in addition through different activities, they were able to use the language among themselves and develop their skills (80).

In her book *reading Jewish Women*, Iris Parush argues that secularization was a process that had a great effect on the role of women in the revival of Hebrew, and their place in society (209). Even the Haskalah movement did not give women the option to read and write in Hebrew, as only men were part of that movement. For generations Yiddish and other languages were prevalent in their daily use, and as mentioned before, Hebrew was used only for praying and studying the Torah. Yiddish was mostly used in eastern and central Europe before WWII. Its origins were

German and some Hebrew. Today it is spoken mainly by Ashkenazi Hasidic Jews in the USA, Israel and Russia. As mentioned before, women were far less likely to know Hebrew than men. Parush describes the resistance to women learning Hebrew - one "justification" for not letting women learn Hebrew was that they were not considered rational "users" of the language. Parush argues that women were excluded from Jewish traditional education, which ironically enabled them to seek more modern education. Considering this fact, I am making a claim that the Haskalah movement was threatened by these women, as they were educated and intelligent at least as the members of the movement were, which as a result made those men exclude women from the movement and the process of the revival of Hebrew altogether. But just as in previous cases in history, these women found a way to benefit their marginalization, and did not let men oppress them once again. They found their own place in the process of the revival of Hebrew.

Parush argues that two elements led women to finally speak Hebrew – one is a national interest, and the other is a female one (209). It was later in the revival process, in the beginning of the 1890's, that the movement realized that having only men know Hebrew is not enough for the language to spread and become one that is used on a daily basis. To ensure the future of Hebrew women were needed, and there was even hope that if women knew Hebrew, it would make men who did not know the language become jealous of the women's knowledge and then they would want to learn it (Bar-Ziv Levy 81). It is in this moment that the movement saw value in women and decided to "exploit" them for their benefit. In addition, I believe that controlling the language gave women a way to claim their national identity (a Zionist one) and establish their status in the new community that was forming, as it was a Hebrew speaking community. Bar-Ziv Levy uses Pierre Bourdieu to explain this, writing that if the accessibility of language is not equal, it perpetuates exclusion and stratification. "Bourdieu analyzes the linguistic prestige and its context in the economic terms of the "linguistic market" and "symbolic capital". Following his claims on the laws

of the linguistic market, it is possible to say that in the traditional Ashkenazi-Jewish language "market" of before the Secular Hebrew, the symbolic linguistic capital was in the hands of the men who control Hebrew. Meaning that the Secularization and the democratization is the reduction of the symbolic capital that is derived from the Hebrew domination. At least some of the resistance for the women's entrance to the Hebrew areas can be understood according to these terms" (5). It gave them the opportunity to be a part of something bigger, creating also new communities for themselves. By knowing the language fluently, they were also able to express and spread their own ideas and beliefs, and not be dependent and always a part of the men's world and narrative. It gave them an opportunity to create their own narrative.

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda referred to it once, as he wrote "Of course, as long as women do not speak Hebrew, there is no hope to revive the tongue in the people" (Ben-Yehuda, by Bar-Adon). Unlike the movement as a whole, Ben-Yehuda made sure to encourage women to participate in the new Hebrew literature, as "she can add emotion, tenderness and subtle shades into the dead, forgotten, old and hard Hebrew" (Aharon Bar-Adon, in Bar-Ziv Levy 81). Ben-Yehuda's wife, Hemda, even expressed herself on this matter, as she said "Did you know which of you can do more? The young girls. A woman who speaks Hebrew, a woman who heads a national movement, a woman who speaks on a stage, her influence is more impressive and compelling than the man" (by Berlowitz Yaffa, in Bar-Ziv Levy 81). This statement comes from a woman that at the beginning was not able to communicate with her son, as she was not allowed to speak Russian with him and had no way to use Hebrew. From her words, it seems that she was able to learn Hebrew later and not only that, she also realized the value in it for her as a woman and advocated for it.

Knowing Hebrew at the time of the first Aliyah, gave women the option to take part in the Zionist movement and the establishment of the new state for the Jewish people. In Rishon Le'tzion, Hebrew opened the door to women for public and feminist activism, and the women of what was

then a settlement called Rishon Le'tzion, were the first to fight and win the right to vote. Some of the women of that time were Nehama Pokchevsky, Rivka Lubman and Shulamit Levin, that together with other women won that right in 1918. Unfortunately, I was not able to find much information about these women, beside what is mentioned in this paper.

Rishon Le'tzion was the first place in Israel where there was a meaningful community of Hebrew speakers. The members of this settlement made great efforts in reviving Hebrew as a day-to-day language. It was not only used in people's homes, but also in public places. Some of the families communicated using only Hebrew, although they also spoke Yiddish, as it was their mother tongue. According to Parush, with the establishment of the first kindergarten, Hebrew became the children's first language, which then helped spread it even more. In school, young girls learned Hebrew, as women were educated, and they later became Jewish "Hebrew" mothers and teachers. The language was going from the schools into people's home.

In Shraybom-Shivtiel's article, she also mentions teachers as having an important role in the revival of Hebrew, through the Teacher's Organization. In 1903 there was the first conference of this organization, in which an important decision was made – "to establish the Hebrew language as the only language of instruction in the Jewish schools" (36). The fact that is surprising about this decision is that at this point, the language lacked many words for many fields of studies. However, "this decision, to speak only Hebrew in schools, was for all intents and purposes a declaration of independence. It meant that the people of Israel from now on live their lives in their own language to be used as the basis for creating their own culture" (Shraybom-Shivtiel 37). This is an important idea, since the initial goal of the revival of the language was to unite all Jewish people, and there was a need for a common language that had to be achieved at any cost. The decision made by the Teachers' organization may seem as a strict one, but looking back, it probably had a big part in spreading Hebrew as the main language for communication.

Parush claims that "The efforts of the people of the First Aliyah to revive Hebrew in their everyday speech began to be fruitful at the turn of the century, among preschoolers. These children, born in 1863 onwards, are the first native speakers of Hebrew, and they played a major role in shaping the new Hebrew character and accent, as well as those who later they struggled to ensure its continued existence as their only language" (17). The people of the first Aliyah made sure to speak as much Hebrew as they can at home, so their children can practice and maintain their language, and also for them to learn more.

According to Bar-Ziv Levy, The Rishon Le'tzion women were full partners in building a Hebrew-speaking community, but their contribution was not recognized. Ignoring their part in this process is not surprising and may have several causes. A fact was that the women of the settlement rarely documented their activities, many of them retired of their public activities after their marriage to attend their homes. In addition to this, there are also two related factors to the research perspective, the contribution and how it is estimated. First, until the 1970's almost no history of women was written, and preoccupation with first Aliyah immigrant women began only in the 1990's (Bar-Ziv Levy 104). The delay in writing women's history is also related to the delay in writing the history of everyday life, and the traditional conception of women in supposedly minor roles. In the context of the revival of the speech, more classic history focuses on key figures and public statements in the journals of the period, while the contribution of women, as a mother, as a kindergarten teacher, and even as a language activist, is only revealed through a history of community and everyday life at home and outside of it. That leads me to a conclusion that although women had a big part in reviving Hebrew and in building the new Israeli society and culture, a decision to erase them from the course of history was made, whether it was conscious or not, only until much later when research started. Bar-Ziv Levy claims that part of it was to blame on the women of Rishon-Le'tzion, as they did not make sure to document their activity, and also most of

them retired after their marriage (29). Unfortunately it looks like it might be too late for these women, as it is very hard to trace individual information about them and tell their stories and their part in shaping the Modern Israeli culture.

Another factor Bar-Ziv Levy mentions, is a quantitative perspective, which compares the number of male speakers and female speakers of Hebrew. In this unique context, the statistical perspective is not a suitable measurement tool. On the historical background of the exclusion of women from Hebrew, the few Hebrew speakers at the beginning of the revival stood out. Despite their small numbers, and perhaps precisely because of them, the women-pioneers of Hebrew speech served as a model of imitation for women and a stimulant for men. Bar-Ziv Levy tells us that these women did not find knowing Hebrew enough, and sought to pass it on to the next generation (30). Maybe if the research would have focused more on the community's daily life rather than how many people speak the language, the information available to us today would have been different. It is also possible that in this case looking at the quality rather than quantity would have been more beneficial in order to learn more about these women.

As one can see, although women had a part in the revival of Hebrew, men had the greater part, or at least this is the way the history available to us today has documented the process. I therefore claim, that in the case of Hebrew, even though it is hard to determine who actually invented the language, when we base the facts we have on the revival process, we can only infer that it was designed by men, and as a result - for men. In this case I believe that gendering the language was necessary for them, as they had to separate themselves from the women. Another fact that is less ideological, is that many words in Hebrew were taken from languages that were already gendered (as Arabic and German), a fact that influenced the gendering of Hebrew. As a consequence of this and in addition to it years of oppression of women - it is not unlikely to assume that the development of Hebrew was documented in a way that discriminates women.

Chapter 3 - Modern Hebrew and Gender

A Glance on Modern Hebrew

According to Hellinger and Busmann in *Gender Across Languages*, the revival of the language "has been considered both a great achievement and a strong necessity in Israeli society" and that has "great implications for the study of gender" (179). With regard to Modern Hebrew, Erez Levon explains that "nearly every constituent type in the language, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, demonstratives, numerals, pronouns, clitics, prepositions, and quantifiers, is either always or very often explicitly marked as either masculine (*zaxar*) or feminine (*nekeva*)" (2). For example, when referring to a chair (*kise*) one should use the masculine form, and when referring to a dress (*simla*) it should be addressed in the feminine form. Adjectives, verbs, numbers and pronouns are also used in a gendered way. The first-person pronouns for I (*ani*) and we (*anaxnu*) are the only ones that are not gendered, while second person you (singular *at/ata*, plural *aten/atem*), and third person he/she (singular *hu/hi*, plural *hem/hen*) are differentiated for gender. Some people believe that gender is coerced by the language.

In her book *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, Judith Plaskow critiques Judaism and religion from a feminist perspective. She also considers the fact that Hebrew is a patriarchal language as she writes, "Our language about divinity is first of all male language; it is selective and partial. The God who supposedly transcends sexuality, who is presumably one and whole, comes to us through language that is incomplete and narrow. The images we use to describe God, the qualities we attribute to God, draw on male pronouns and experience and convey a sense of power and authority that is clearly male. If God is male, and we are in God's image, how can maleness not be the norm of Jewish humanity? If maleness is normative, how can women not be Other? And if women are Other, how can we not speak of God in a language of Otherness and

dominance, a language drawn from male experience?" (7). Plaskow takes us again to the origins of

Judaism and by way the origins of the Hebrew language and tries to draw from the Jewish religion.

According to what she writes, a crisis is created for Jewish women, especially religious ones, when

having to face God. His whole image is of male, the references to him are made in the masculine

form of language. Where are they situated within it? How is the lack of a language for women

affecting them? According to Regier and Yang, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that "human

thought is shaped by language, leading speakers of different languages to think differently" (2).

It also means that "the language we speak and think in shapes the way we perceive the world"

(Basel 642). If a language does shape the human mind as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggest, then

does all the biblical stories, their sexist nature and the extreme gendered language that is used still

have an effect on how we act in a society and how we perceive it, regardless of our personal

religious beliefs ?

The Intersection of Language Gender

When we consider the ways gender is expressed in language, I believe that it will be hard

for individual adults to determine whether their language is affected by their set of ideas and the

way they want to express things and feelings, or is it actually working the other way around. In her

groundbreaking work from 1978, *Language and Women's Place*, Robin Lakoff[4] states that

"Languages uses us as much as we use language" (Lakoff 1). I then ask, how the use of a gendered

language, Hebrew in this case, maintains the gender binary, and more than that – reinforces

discriminatory practices?

According to Lakoff, "If it is indeed true that our feelings about the world color our

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[4] Robin Lakoff is a professor of linguistics at the University of California. Her work used in this research is considered as a marker of the development of a new field – language and gender studies (mentioned by Laura Mary Elizabeth Hare).

expression of our thoughts, then we can use our linguistic behavior as a diagnostic of our hidden feelings about things" (3). In her article, she claims that unlike actions and behaviors that can be analyzed through a psychoanalytic lens, while one can hide or distort our perception, "linguistic data are there, in black and white, or on tape, unambiguous and unavoidable" (3). The language that surrounds us, the words we read and hear, and the messages we absorb throughout life in order to understand and then shape our own ideas on things and people are clear and always there in its different forms. I believe that the way we use language can also tell us a lot about the way our thoughts and beliefs are shaped, even when we try to hide it while using the language. As a woman, I find myself many times using phrases like *I will try* and others that may suggest insecurity. I learned from a young age to use a language that is predominantly a masculine one, especially in speech. It is not surprising then, for me, that I think and as a result speak, in a way that is less confident and assertive than my male counterpart. The two – language and ideas – are interrelated, and we cannot think of them as two different entities. In the case of gender, the way most individuals articulate themselves, is in a way that reinforces the gender binary and women's submissiveness and inferiority in society. I would admit that I find myself many times in need to rephrase my thought and feelings in speech and writing, as a way not only to stop spreading misogynistic and chauvinistic ideas, but also change the way I think about myself and others and also the way I see things.

Feminism and Language

In order for one to better understand my claim on the way a gendered-language use is reinforcing women's oppression, a short note must be made about the oppressive ideas in society against women. As shown also in the story of creation, a woman as an individual is automatically thought of as inferior to a man. The notion that men are better, stronger, smarter, powerful and has

an important role in society comparing to women – who's most important job is to serve as a good and nurturing mother of mankind – has been here for a long time. I realized only at an older age that I was raised on these oppressive ideas. It is unfortunate, but also a fact, that many studies in different disciplines (for example psychology, sociology, biology) have been conducted in order to prove this claim of men's superiority over women, as conservatives views were dominant through biological and religious justifications (Crawford 11). Despite the fact that along history many courageous women (from Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, queen Elizabeth I, Susan B. Anthony and Gloria Steinem to name a few) fought these oppressive ideas. The real change in the way society sees and treats women changed with the start of the first wave of feminism[5] at the late nineteenth century. It was when the franchise for women was the most important goal of the feminist movement.

Women's massive oppression was, and still is, something that one could not ignore, and so women took the streets and fought for it. Unfortunately, even after all of the movement's fights, and although the situation is better today than it was, women are still oppressed in different ways, and it seems like a never-ending fight. As mentioned times before, I believe that the language as used today has a great impact on that fact, and especially when using a gendered language, such as Hebrew. According to Lakoff, "when a little girl 'talks rough' like a boy, she will normally be ostracized, scolded, or made fun of. In this way society, in the form of a child's parents and friends, keeps her in line, in her place. This socializing process is, in most of its aspects, harmless and often necessary, but in this particular instance – the teaching of special linguistic uses to little girls – it raises serious problems, though the teachers may well be unaware of this" (47). This quote is emphasizing not only the fact that the way we use language can reinforce chauvinist ideas, but that

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[5] It is when the franchise for women was the most important goal of the feminist movement. According to Nancy Cott, in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, "the term 'feminism' emerged in the first two decades of the twentieth century" (3). Cott claims it was a part of a broader rebellious spirit of the early twentieth century. It is in that time period that women demanded the control over their lives back.

also while language is used, people are not always aware of it – that is how deep the language grounds ideas within us / our ideas are greatly represented in our language. Lakoff also argues that the ways women and men are using spoken language reflects and reinforce subordinate practices and position in society – "the overall effect of 'women's language' – meaning both language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone – is this: it submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, on the one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject-matter and uncertainty about it; and when a woman is being discussed, by treating her as an object – sexual or otherwise – but never a serious person with individual views" (48). This is done usually in an attempt to restrict women from power, keeping them in their place, as the language is used as a tool of oppression. It is also women's linguistic practices that maintain their oppression, what one can refer to as "talking like a lady", as they are socialized in a specific manner and taught how to speak about themselves and in relation to men in a way that maintains discrimination and oppressive environment. I believe that we reinforce ideas by the way we use language, but we lack the awareness to it. As soon as the awareness is there, it feels like a struggle when using the language (any language for that matter), as it feels that the language available today is limited. I find myself many times trying to restate spoken words, as I realize that when I speak Hebrew my language is more doubtful and hesitant.

Another interesting issue with language that Lakoff is referring to, is that when facing a mixed group of people, women and men, the default solution is to use the masculine pronouns in order to speak about the group. "Although semantically both men and women are included in the groups referred to by the pronouns in these sentences, only *he* and related masculine forms are commonly possible" (4). It is the same case in Hebrew when there is a need to speak to or about a group – the masculine pronouns are used, as if a woman, or women, are not included in the discourse and conversation taking place. It is also the case when one wants to describe something

or someone, that they use the masculine form in order to do so. Women are then erased by the use of language. Later in the paper, I will try to find reasons as to why it happens. An interesting thing happens while I write these lines – as I noticed I used the verb *try* instead of simply stating - *I will*. It is another known tendency of women, that reflects the insecurity they are raised with, and then being criticized for – "because of the way she speaks, the little girl – now grown to womanhood – will be accused of being unable to speak precisely or to express herself forcefully" (47).

The study of language and gender has developed immensely since the 1970's, while the biggest shift happened in the late 1970's as "rather than conceptualizing gender as an identity someone just "has", analyst began viewing gender as involving what people "do". In this view, gender does not just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changing through people's performance of gender acts, as they project their own claimed gender identities, ratify or challenged others' gender identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 4). It is in this point, that gender and language are considered together, as language has an effect on the way one is doing gender, as "the "performance turn" has led many language and gender scholars to question familiar gender categories like *woman* and *man* and to explore the variety of ways in which linguistic performances relate to constructing both conventional gender identities and identities that in one way or another challenge conventional gender norms" (4). The discourse has changed from *having* a gender to *doing* one, and it became necessary to find possible explanations to it and solutions to the challenges it raises.

Gender

Gender can be thought of in many ways, and many gender theorists, sociologists and psychologists researched and theorized about gender, and the binary of nature v. nurture. While

gender was once synonymous with sex, as sex was determined at birth based solely on genitalia, the definition of it today is detached from a biological sex and is more fluid. In the Oxford English Dictionary, gender is defined as "either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female", and also as "the fact or condition of belonging to or identifying with a particular gender". In *Sexing the Body*, Anne Fausto-Sterling sums the ideas of gender and sex in the following way – "labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender – not science – can define our sex. Furthermore, our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place" (3).

Gender is an idea that is embedded deeply in us as human beings – it is affecting and shaping our sets of beliefs, expectations, desires, actions, communication and even institutions. The ideas about gender are so deep, that "we take it for granted and that they are true. Accepting common adage as scientific facts. It is precisely because gender seems natural, and beliefs about gender seem to be an obvious truth, that we need to step back and examine gender from a new perspective" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 9). It is at this point that we should stop and start question and challenge the ideas around gender, that are reinforced through language.

Further ideas about gender is found in *Language and Gender* by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, as they define gender as "a system of meaning - a way of constructing notions of male and female – and language is the primary means through which we maintain or contest old meanings, and construct or resist new ones" (6). Gender is a social arrangement, and each of us has his gender built based on and into the gender norms, and as mentioned before, one aspect of gender is its performativity, as "gender performances are available to everyone, but with them come

constrains on who can perform which personate with impunity. And this is where gender and sex come together, as society tries to match up ways of behaving with biological sex assignment" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 10). The performativity discussed briefly earlier can be manifested by the use of language.

"To understand how gender is socially constructed and to analyze the emergence of multiple gender identities through the process of discursive production and practical reiteration" (Butler 2). The assumption is that women are seen as inferior, since society is reinforcing and then causing the internalization of a heteronormative discourse. According to Judith Butler, language is "the imaginable domain of gender" (9), as it sets limits to the gender experience and determines their achievability. If the language is limited, so is one's experiences in society. The most useful and beneficial example to this research will be the limited pronouns in Hebrew, and the gender binary. If someone feels as if they are neither a woman nor a man, how should they talk about themselves? Furthermore, how should they think about themselves? In which terms? In Hebrew, there is no neutral pronoun similar to *they* in English, therefore it creates limitations on individuals. The language recognition can cause a restriction of a person from social institutions, as they are trying to deny one's womanhood or masculinity by referring to them in the wrong/unchosen pronoun. In Hebrew, pronouns are gendered and limited, and the masculine form is the default for use in spoken and written language.

Linguistics

When the research of sociolinguistic variation of gender started in the late 1960's, its initial aim was to explain the relationship between language and culture in a general way, rather than specifically the relationship between language and gender, "However, the category of sex (understood simply as a binary division between males and females) was often included as a major

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social variable and instances of gender variation (or sex differentiation, as it was generally called) were noted in relation to other sociolinguistic patterns, particularly, social class and stylistic differentiation" (Romaine 1). It was a time when sociolinguists started to describe the differences between what they distinguished as women's and men's speech, and it was only at the early 1990's that sociolinguists started to take sex and gender differences as a starting point when researching the interactions of a language with sex and gender (Freed 699). I do not see it as a coincidence, as the study of gender in its more familiar and fluid concept started approximately at the same time. According to Bonnie McElhinny (22), there are four significant theories related to gender and language –

1. Gender and sex are closely related, and the study of gender is closely related to the study of heterosexuality.
2. Gender is a trait, a characteristic.
3. The study of gender is the study of individuals.
4. Gender is best studied where it is most prominent.

According to this assumption then, it is important to differentiate sex and gender – a task that western feminists scholars took upon themselves, in order to better understand how gender works in language. McElhinny thus leads us to ask not "what are the gender differences?", but "what difference does gender make?" and "how did gender come to make a difference?" (22). Essentially, we are trying to ask what cultural ideas about gender are being normalized by the language we use?

An interesting point made by McElhinny, is that "gendered talk is mainly a personal characteristic or limited to the institution of the family" (32), which means that gendered language should be observed in informal conversations, in smaller groups and daily conversations. I prefer this approach as to how it is best to study gender differences in language and its effects, as I believe we can learn more about the process an individual is experiencing while using a gendered

language. From there we can go study the functions of a language in a group. What does it mean for me, as a woman, to use Hebrew the way it is constructed? In what ways I think, or even know, it shaped me? Although I believe that institutions (may be formal as government, or informal as family), shape our minds and cultural views, it is within an individual that a resistant begin, or as Freed puts it "when a sufficiently large number of men and women deviate from the stereotyped expectations that society has had for them, change actually begins to take hold" (714).

Another interesting point made by McElhinny, is that we have to consider when gender is "salient and relevant" (33). Sociolinguist Barrie Thorne for example, was interested in cases where gender division was prominent, as she was looking at girls and boys playing and being separated into groups. According to her, "we need to understand when gender is largely irrelevant, and when it seems central, when gender is marked and when it is unmarked, for it is only in "developing a sense of the whole and attending to the waning as well as the waxing of gender salience [that] we can specify not only the social relations that uphold but also those that undermine the construction of gender as binary opposition" (Thorne 108). According to this, it is important to determine when gender is creating a problem that needs to be attended. I believe that in the case of Hebrew, in which every word has a gender attached to it, and as a result it creates a strong gender division in everything that is being said, gender imposes a problem, always. It is always relevant to look into the gendered nature of Hebrew. For me, questioning the relevance of gender in a language is questioning one's identity. I think that it is important not only to ask when gender is relevant, but also to who and where? Although I feel strongly about gender and the way it interacts with language, and the way it can shape one's identity (mine included), I acknowledge the fact that for some individuals and in some situations – it is not making any difference. In the following pages I will present some short interviews made by me with Israeli women, native speakers of Hebrew, hoping to shed more light on this issue.

In her review of the research made about language and gender, Alice Freed says that it all started with Robin Lakoff's theory about women's language from 1973, or as she calls it - "the deficit theory" (701). According to Freed, "It described women's language as ineffective in comparison to men's and explained women's manner of speech as being a reflection of women's insecurity and powerless place in society. By contrast, the dominance theory of language and gender, presented first by Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley in 1975, focused on issues of patriarchy - that is, male power and dominance. Researchers characterized the social and political arrangement between the sexes as one in which women were viewed and treated as unequal to men because the norms of society had literally been established by men" (710). Freed presents us with a third theory – "the difference theory, represented by the writings of Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982) and Deborah Tannen (1990, 1994), hypothesized that women and men used specific and distinct verbal strategies and communicative styles which were developed in same-sex childhood peer groups" (701). According to this theory, by focusing on language differences instead of power differences (i.e. male superiority), we can produce a more positive approach. Freed continues by writing that "Feminist linguists who objected to the difference framework (Troemel-Ploetz 1991; Freed 1992; Uchida 1992) argued that the particular sets of verbal strategies associated with women and men emerged not in a vacuum but were an integral part of the power arrangements between men and women in societies around the world" (701). Furthermore, Freed states that "These deeply entrenched gender-specific linguistic stereotypes apparently serve critical social purposes; they appear to maintain not only a status quo that advantages men over women and heterosexuals over homosexuals and lesbians, but one that helps establish and maintain rules of feminine and masculine behavior even if these generalizations fail to reflect social or linguistic reality" (706). The stereotypes Freed discusses are similar to the ones Lakoff is mentioning – women are asking more questions than men, their voice is less assertive, women curse less, being

more hesitant in their speech. When thinking about these ideas in the context of Hebrew, we can consider the fact that the masculine form is the one to be the default for use, creates a situation in which women in the Israeli society develop speech that is less assertive and dominant, to the point that sometimes women will speak about themselves and other women using masculine form of speech. In a society where the masculine form is used to approach a large crowed of women *and* men, the women are being erased in this situation. I believe that it is not only that they are not being regarded, but also silenced at the same time.

As in many other cases, the threat on the gender binary starts when people are becoming aware of the situation and the effects it has on them, as individuals and groups, and when they are trying to reclaim their own identity. When a language is limited or not available in some cases, it is hard to communicate and feel a sense of inclusivity and community. It is exactly at this point that people are seeking for a change. I am hoping that the following interviews will help to understand better the issue of a gendered language and even suggests ideas how to solve it.

Interviews

I had the privilege to discuss the issue of Hebrew as a gendered language and the way it affects women with a few of my friends from Israel. I conducted interviews with elven women over the phone, all of them over the age of 30 and educated. I was trying to get a better picture of the way Hebrew effects them, as my ideas alone on this issue might not be enough. The questions presented to them were as follow -

1. Do you think Hebrew is a gendered language?

2. When did you notice this, and if so in what types of situations?

3. Do you think that the fact that Hebrew is a gendered language has any effect on the ways in which you think, talk and act on a daily basis? If the answer is yes, then in what ways?

4. Do you think Hebrew needs to be changed? Do you have any suggestions as to how?

5. Do you speak other languages fluently? If so, do you think that the gendering nature of Hebrew has an effect on the way you translate from that language to Hebrew?

All of the women interviewed reply to the first question in the same way – yes, Hebrew is a gendered language. The answers to this question were not surprising to me, as one of the answers to the third question was, which I will get to soon. It is also not surprising, and some of them did mention that the way I phrased my questions is gendered. As my audience in this case was exclusively women, I used the feminine form to phrase my questions. As for the second question, all of the women stated that they can tell that the fact that Hebrew is a gendered language was clear to them since they can remember themselves. Many of them said that the fact that masculine pronouns are used when talking to a crowd that has males in it, in some cases not even as its majority, bothers them. This was a rule of the language made by the Academy of the Hebrew

Language, and for years people thought, like I did, that this rule has been changed, meaning that if a crowd has a majority of female in it, then feminine pronouns can and should be used. After a short research in the website of the Academy, I found the following -

"Even so: In public there is a rumor that the academy has decided that in cases that a majority of women is present, there is a need to use a female tongue. But this is nothing but a rumor, and it has nothing to trust. The male form of Hebrew is used not only for male. It is also the shape that we take when we have no need to distinguish sex – that is, it is also the unmarked form of the unmarked. Therefore, the male form is also good for females, unlike the feminine form: This indicates only female and takes out the male. This is the way of the Hebrew" (https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2010/10/04/איך-פונים-לקבוצה-שרובה-נשים). Furthermore, at the end of this short article, it is stated that "using a male's tongue also where there are mostly women is the way of the Hebrew, and the academy does not see itself entitled to determine the policy of this path. If the speaker sees a right to take another way, he will do so in his opinion". This is interesting to consider, as one of the academy's target, again stated in the website and is part of the law of its establishment by the government, is "to direct the development of the Hebrew language on the basis of study of the tongue by its periods and to its branches. Indeed, the Academy is the most halachic institution in the field of Hebrew language, and its decisions in grammar, spelling, terminology, and transcription issues that have been published require State institutions". If that is actually true, then why the academy is refusing to take a stand on an issue that is very important to many people, and which a formal modification is being asked for? This can imply that the Academy is trying to maintain the gendered nature of Hebrew, and in doing do, it maintains a social hierarchy in the patriarchal Israeli society.

In addition to this, some of the women said that when filling out forms or looking at different ads, the language used is a masculine one with a side note stating that it addresses women

as well. This sometimes makes them feel excluded and irrelevant, and in some cases, they would

stop reading an ad or filling out a form, which essentially means they are restricted from things.

One interesting answer was that women talk about themselves in a more hypothetical way,

especially when talking about their future, aspirations and abilities, and also when discussing

female issues, as pregnancy and their menstrual cycle (as being masculine nouns, when a woman

describing her pregnancy or period, she uses adjectives in their masculine form and not a feminine

one). I had never thought about it until now, but it is interesting to think why a woman will

describe experiences that are exclusively feminine, using the masculine form of words. I cannot

help but wonder – were men trying to control even that experience that is exclusively a female

experience, by having rules of tongue that force women to refer and describe it in masculine

phrases? Is it a way of controlling the situation that has nothing to do with men?

The third question that I asked was the most meaningful one for me, as I was trying to get a

better understanding how this affect women's lives. There was only one woman who stated that the

gendering of Hebrew has no effect on her in her daily life and on the way she thinks. As I was

trying to understand how it is possible, the only answer I got was that it is the way Hebrew is

constructed and how she was learned to use it, and she does not think it has more to it than the fact

that it is gendered. For me it is hard to understand, as I can trace the way it affects how I think and

behave, and in recent years I am working hard to change it. Some women said that they find

themselves using the masculine form of words much more when talking to or about a crowd of

people, as they are used to doing it, and even though they are trying to fight it, it is hard. Eight of

the women I interviewed said that they are fighting it by using the feminine form of words when

they should, or even when they do not (as when talking to a mixed crowd), as a way of defying it.

One of them told me that in some situations she avoids using gender in a different way – instead of

saying "I am going to the doctor (*rofe*, the masculine form in Hebrew), she simply says "I am

going to the clinic". When she is talking about female professions, she insists on using the feminine form in cases the words are available (as I will demonstrate later, some words do not exist for female or male when it comes to professions). One of the women interviewed is a teacher, and she tells that she tries her best to instill in her students the need for inclusivity in language and the importance of including women in the conversation. One of the things she mostly cares about is correct writing when it comes to gender, and she insists her students will follow the rules, as in many cases people prefer using masculine form in their writing (as is the default). She tells that it is not only correcting their language, but also makes them more open to ideas of gender fluidity.

When the women were asked if they see a need to change the language, all of them answered yes. Even the one that said that she does not experience any discomfort with the gendering of Hebrew in her daily life. Her answer was that before we can actually change the language, we first need to change the social perception and gender norms, a thing that we both agreed is going to be hard and will take a long time (if possible at all). One of the women said that she hears the change happening slowly, sometimes in the street and especially in academia and the media. She believes that the fact that there are more women in these sectors than ever before helps in making that change. More women are represented, therefore their voice is heard more and by that they are able to spread the change.

One interesting figure mentioned by one of the women I interviewed is Merav Michaeli, a current member of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), a former journalist, radio broadcaster and activist. She is one of the most prominent feminist activists in Israel, as she fights for women and civil rights for over twenty years. She is mostly known for her use of language, as she is always using the feminine form of the words, and when she writes she uses plural pronouns, including a period to differentiate between female and male, in order to include both genders in her audience of readers. Even while doing that, she still uses the feminine form before mentioning the masculine

one. She is criticized all the time for doing it, as some people claim that she is "refusing to obey the masculine nature of Hebrew. In her morning radio show she insists on speaking while using a feminine language, which gives rise to strange phrases…Michaeli turns to "our independent listeners" (using the feminine form *atzmayiot* and not *atzmay* as expected)" (fromhttps://dagesh.wordpress.com). This fact upsets many people, but it does not make her change the way she uses language or being proud of it. She even tries to convince more people to do the same, something that is not actually happening. While scrolling through her Facebook page, the way she uses language and the priority she gives to the feminine form in Hebrew over the masculine one is very noticeable. When watching her videos, one cannot escape it. One can either associate himself with it or not, but it is not possible to ignore. In the answers I received in one of the interviews, it was mentioned that Michaeli is doing a great service to women as she is raising the awareness to this issue of language, and by way helping in raising awareness to women's issues in general, suggesting their inferiority in society. The other part of this answer was that there is a need in having a campaign advocating for a change in the language and one woman suggested that maybe having a curriculum that will focus on the gendering of language, its effects and the way we can change it can be helpful. Maybe if we can implement a change in perception and language from a younger age, the change will be possible.

Most of the women said that the change is needed in order to include both women and men in the conversation, creating an inclusive space that will make it possible for everyone to feel part of the society. In Israel, as exemplified above, women are being excluded from the conversation by the gendering nature and use of Hebrew. If we consider the use of the masculine form of words when discussing, for example, teachers, this ignores the population of female teachers, while the fact is that in Israel there are more female than male teachers, as happens with additional professions (like nurses, something that came up many times in feminist circles lately with the

spread of Corona). An opposite example is a discussion about kindergarten teachers (*ganenet*), which completely excluded men for a long time, as there were no words in Hebrew available for it. If we consider another case, then there are many discussions about poverty while using the masculine form of words in these discussions (*aniim*). In that case women are completely ignored, although the fact is that the majority of the poor population in Israel are women. I believe, as some of the women said in the interviews, that language creates reality, but also has the power to change it, therefore we should strive for a change.

The last question was most interesting to me, as I find myself translating things I read and hear all the time, and I have noticed a pattern in the way I do it. I was interested to see if other women, who speak additional languages to Hebrew, experience the same challenges I do. All of the women interviewed are fluent in English, as myself, and so it was easier to discuss this question and experiences we share. I can testify about myself that most of the time when I read something or when someone is speaking to me and describing something in English, I always translate it in my head using the masculine form of the words. Only when I know for sure that it is a female that is being discussed, or when pronouns like *she* and *he* are used, I can make the translation in the accurate form. The women in the interview experience it in the same way, only they did not think about it before I asked the question. They suddenly realized that when they hear a phrase in English, even a simple one as "they were discussing it in class", they think about a group of men and not women. Only if pronouns like *he* or *she* are used is when they can translate using a female or male form. This is how bad the masculine form is dominant when using Hebrew, and how it not only affects and individual when using Hebrew, but also when using another language and trying to translate it.

The conclusion I can draw from interviewing Israeli women that speak Hebrew all the time is that it has major effects on their lives, and that they do want to see a change, just like I think. But

it is not only a change in the language that they look for, it is also a change in perception. They do realize, even if not saying it explicitly, that the gendered nature of Hebrew is oppressive for them, for all women. It excludes and erase them from the conversation in ways that some women are trying to fight, like Knesset member Michaeli, or they find ways to do it themselves. For some of them the problem starts with the language, while for some it is the social perception that causes problem with the language. Either way a solution is needed.

Modern Hebrew

The Hebrew (or Ivrit/עברית), is the national language of the Jewish majority of the State of Israel, and it is a gendered language. The version of Hebrew as we know it today is called the Modern Hebrew and as mentioned earlier was revived at the end of the 19th century. The language is regulated by the powerful Hebrew Language Academy. Since its revival it was used and developed by the many immigrants that came to Israel right before and after its establishment in 1948, mainly from Eastern Europe.

According to Hellinger and Busmann, in Hebrew "every noun is either masculine or feminine. Such gender does not have very much to do with maleness and femaleness" (180). Masculine is the basic form of words and default for use, while the feminine form usually has suffix added to it, it is marked (for example, in Hebrew a male singer is *zamar*, while a female is *zameret*). In this way, the Hebrew language is creating gender division, and as shown in the interviews I have conducted, this gender division has an effect on women in different realms. Another idea that is important to keep in mind is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is very hard to scientifically prove that claim, although I tend to agree with it. Malka Muchnik claims that even if we choose to "not accept this assumption and claim that it is reality and society that influence language, and not the other way around, it is worth considering how and to what extent social

norms are linguistically reflected" (1). The fact that we use the Hebrew word for *man* to describe

the most basic things, like hu*man* beings, does not provide a neutrality and by way inclusiveness,

or according to Miller and Swift "when you use the word man generically, people do tend to think

male, and tend not to think female" (24). It implies of inequality and the domination of patriarchy.

An example of how language can shape our thought is also explained by Eckert and McConnell,

who say that "Nonsexist language guidelines generally warn against the use of masculine form as

generics. Empirical research shows that when a form conventionally stands in opposition to a

feminine form - can have a masculine interpretation – people tend in various ways to interpret the

form as masculine rather than simply as gender-inclusive generic" (245). I see this as explaining

why by having the masculine form as the "natural" one, we risk at making people think male,

giving men power over women.

 In casual conversations and usage of Hebrew, the masculine form is the one that is usually

used, and it is also used in formal documents (usually with a footnote mentioning that although the

text is phrased in a masculine form, it addresses males and females alike). One way of trying to be

less discriminatory is adding the female suffix after a slash or within parentheses. Most of the ads

and advertisements in Hebrew are using the masculine form, and by that it creates exclusion of

women. No matter what one writes or say in Hebrew, he cannot avoid the need to choose one of the

two genders. Think about a situation in which a person is lecturing to an audience. In English there

is not much to think about in regards to the construction of gender in the language, as one can

avoid using gender when referring to a group of people (having available the pronouns), but in

Hebrew, the lecturer natural inclination is to address the audience in a masculine form, unless it is

exclusively a female audience. It creates a complete gendered discourse, in which women are

almost always excluded. It is hard to neutralize gender in Hebrew, and in many cases, people are

using the masculine plural pronoun for they/them, and rarely the feminine one.

Language serves us in offering countless possibilities of mapping and labeling objects, emotions, ourselves and other human beings. Language helps us navigate our way in society through these labels[6]. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, "Gender categories like those labeled by *man* and *woman*, *girl* and *boy* play a prominent role in the social practices that sustain a gender order in which male/female is seen as a sharp dichotomy separating two fundamentally different kinds of human beings and in which gender categorization is viewed as always relevant" (228). Even though this quote may suggest that maintaining a gender binary and hierarchy is important and even necessary and good in a society, I would suggest that at the same time it creates an order, it is also maintaining, if not creating, inequality and chaos. It creates not only a division between women and men, but also men's superiority over women, as Freed mentioned, women's language can reflect their insecurity and powerlessness in comparison to men in society. As mentioned before, as language being the most basic means of communication in a civilized society, its power is used in order to maintain this gender binary and structure of power.

I was growing up in a society that uses Hebrew as the first language (as "the state's language", and with Arabic being a formal language until 2018, then receiving "a special status", with the passing of the Basic Law: the Nation State of the Jewish People). One of the things I was taught since my first grammar (or as it is called in Israel – *Lashon*, meaning tongue), is the differentiation between male and female – with numbers, with objects, when talking about myself. Not only that, my grandmother was a strict user of Hebrew and was always correcting my speech in the context of gender. Another aspect of gender in language is seen in a different way, like when I first started reading. I was handed mostly books that its protagonist was a boy, a male. If it was

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[6] It is important for me to mention at this point that I see the use of labels as an essential part of our language and social life, although the problem with it should be with its connotations and stigmas that we as a society attaching to it (i.e. we should be able to use the a word like *gay* and not having to apologize for it, as it is in fact a description of an individual's sexual orientation, identity). I believe that labels help us communicate better.

not a boy, it was a male character – a lion, a dog, a tree, all described in a masculine form. They were always strong, smart, beautiful, it almost seemed as if they were these magical creatures that all should aspire to be. They were saints. And I adored them for all that. If I was reading a book about girls, they were mostly princesses or queens of some kind, or just girls being good girls. Acting like a lady.

In an interesting article by Hanna Herzog, the author claims that "In the 1960's and 1970's women were introduced into Israeli social science research via the "sex" variable. Sex role differences were taken for granted and women were transparent, assumed to be an entity within the family[7]" (341). It is one fact that sheds light over why it took so much time to start having an actual research on women, independent of men. If women were seen as an inseparable part of men, then there was no actual need, or reason, to differentiate the two in language. As coined by Herzog – women were "transparent" in many ways, in way by language. I believe that the fact that Hebrew is gendered to begin with, and to its core, was helping in creating and maintaining women's transparency in the Israeli society. It goes hand in hand with the belief of "the woman's place", as a caring mother to her children.

Hebrew is a Semitic language that is marked very clearly according to gender. According to Malka Muchnik, the feminine forms in Hebrew are less visible for two reasons – the first one is the fact that the masculine form is always the generic form people use, the second is that the names of professions and occupations are used only in the masculine form (11). These two facts create the invisibility of women and as a result, the social perception and the association of things in a masculine way. For example, when one wants to refer to a doctor, the word *rofe* will be used – the masculine form in Hebrew. The same case is with lawyer, engineer, scientist. As Lakoff stated in

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[7] It is not only in the Israeli society that women were transparent, and no research was existed on women's issue, as it was the case all over the world.

her article, women's language is restricted – both in the way they can use it and in the way it is used to talk about them, describe them. It creates a situation in which a woman has a limited way of talking, and therefore thinking, about herself. An example presented in one of the interviews, when one of the women chose to say she was going to the clinic instead of a doctor, trying to avoid using the masculine form of the word. The inaccessibility of the language makes women think in a certain way, that is unsurprisingly diminishing them. It also makes other people discuss women in a way that they are treated as objects, and not a free-thinking and abled individuals. When addressing a mixed group in a masculine pronouns, one erases the presence of women in the room, and maybe prevents their voice from being heard. Muchnik takes the discussion further by using Schultz, claiming that the relation between language and sexism is "a semantic derogation of women", by explaining that it is not a coincidence that "positive words are related to men, while negative words are related to women, as they clearly represent a patriarchal view of the world" (26).

Although it was already at the beginning of the twentieth century that the Israeli feminist activism begin, it was not until the 1970's that the first women's rights movement was established, demanding for women to be more included in the public sphere (Muchnik 26). An interesting fact is that the Hebrew word for gender, *migdar* was coined only in the 1990's by feminist sociologists and was accepted by the Academy of the Hebrew Language in 1996. The association of the word in Hebrew is with *gader*, which means a fence, limit, but can also mean *hagdara*, which means definition (2). This can be thought of as the beginning of a change of the discourse and the demand for a linguistic change. A linguistic change can occur as a natural process, as a part of the changing world (for example when there is a need to invent new words), or as a result of a social change and process, especially when referring to gender. According to Pauwels, there are two attitudes, linguistic and feminist, towards that change. One is that a language only reflects a society while it cannot change it, and therefore a linguistic reform will not change the society. To solve the

problem in this case, a social reform needs to take place to promote gender equality. The second one is that a change in a language can in fact promote a change in social and cultural skills, and by that promote gender equality (552). As Pauwels agrees with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language shapes social reality, she suggests that the change of a language is affected by many factors, like people's understanding of a language, their motivation, their view of the language and the type of language they are seeking to change (555). I suggest that the two attitudes are not conflicting each other, but can, and should, occur together. Pauwels discusses language disruption as a strategy to expose a sexist nature of a language (555). This is done to raise awareness to the fact that a language is sexist. An example for it is the use of the word *herstory* instead of history. Some people even call for a creation of "a new women-centered language" (555).

Going back again to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, claiming that language can determine, and as a result also limit, the way we perceive reality, we can also assume that the perception of gender in language can be an element of related social norms and behavior. As language being a central part of a culture, a society, I see it as reflecting on the culture, while also shaping it, as language being the main mean of communication amongst human beings – therefore making it such an important component of a culture. The case of the Israeli society and the way Hebrew plays in it is an interesting case, as this society can be thought of as relatively new. As mentioned earlier, the daily use of Hebrew in its modern form started only at the late 19th century, and although the language was not invented at the time, it was greatly developed from that point on. As shown earlier, the narrative of the language's revival is one dominated by men, while women's part in this process is very hard to trace, although it is safe to assume that this process would not have been possible without women being a part of it.

Hebrew and its Effects in the 2000's Israeli Society

Wherever you look, whether reading a textbook, scrolling through wanted ads, looking at job requirements, or just watching the news on the television – the effects of the gendered nature of Hebrew are noticeable everywhere. As mentioned numerous times before, the default when using Hebrew (spoken or written) is to use the male form – this is the basic, unmarked form of speech and writing, and if one wants to refer to a female, then the words have to be marked. This fact situates men and male characteristic at the front of the discourse, contributing to their domination in society, to the extent that they gain a form of control, and as a result the oppression of women. It as if the existence of women in the Israeli society is absent, or rather erased, by the gendered and oppressive use of Hebrew.

An interesting case to consider in Hebrew is the way some words are used to describe different professions. The words used to describe a woman's job are usually degrading than when describing the same job being performed by a man. For example, a male cook in Hebrew will be called a chef (same word is used in Hebrew – *shef*), as this word suggests prestige and success in the culinary world. If one wants to talk about a female cook – she will be simply called a cook (or *tabachit* in Hebrew). The word *tabachit* has more of a domestic character, and the word does not suggest anything else but the fact that it is a woman who is cooking. Moreover, as a woman that is naturally her job and place at home, therefore there is no reason to glorify it in the same way it is done for men. Another great example is a kindergarten teacher. It is actually one of just a few words in Hebrew that had only a female form to describe this profession – the word *ganenet*, which despite the fact that it existed in only one form, it was the feminine one (and not the masculine form as one can expect). It is only in recent years, and due to social changes, that men brought themselves to work as kindergarten teachers, that the Academy of the Hebrew Language add the word *ganan* to the vocabulary (notice how it is not marked).

The case of the words for kindergarten teacher - *ganan* and *ganenet* in Hebrew presents us with possibilities. It is an example of one case in which the Academy of the Hebrew Language "gave in" to social changes and new social standards and was able to create a new language for a new situation. It raises a few questions then – if it is possible to invent new words, or at least create modifications to existing words, why is it not done more often? In what cases the Academy of the Hebrew Language determines that modifications to the language are necessary? Which cases are in priority for the Academy of the Hebrew Language? And above all – who makes the final decision?

Malka Muchnik presents us with a few linguistic changes to solve the problem of the gendering nature of Hebrew – neutralization, feminization or masculinization. She cautiously warns us that "the ideal way to achieve equality would be by linguistic neutralization, but as we have seen, this is almost impossible in Hebrew, because almost all words are grammatically determined either masculine or feminine" (34). Despite that and the many grammatical rules, it is not impossible to make the change, whether if by individual attempts or firm positions requiring linguistic and social change. Below are her suggestions for linguistic changes regarding gender in Modern Hebrew -

1. **Gender neutralization** – in 1984 the Israeli Ministry of Education published official guidelines for the use of non-sexist language when referring to or addressing men and women (Muchnik). Later, there was another publication dealing with the need of equal linguistic treatment in textbooks. Muchnik claims that "Non-discriminating forms are imposed on job ads in the media, and advertisers", which supposed to use the "double form" (35). But does it really work? Do advertisers actually use the double form in order to avoid linguistic and gender discrimination? With textbooks and exams, Muchnik claims that instructions are mostly written in plural form that are neutral (as *ta'aru, kitvo,* which means simply write or describe), but in most cases it is hard to avoid gender specification.

Muchnik concludes that "although, apparently, these changes represent a successful step towards a more equitable use of the language, as compared to classical Hebrew, and may avoid sexist forms of address, in reality this does not entirely happen" (36). This neutralization is possible in English for example, by the use of the pronouns *they* and *you*.

2. **Gender feminization** – feminine forms are used when referring to a female group, especially between female teacher to female students and female commanders to female soldiers. Muchnik says that "these forms are scarcely used in contemporary Hebrew, and are almost exclusively found in canonic literary language or among highly educated older speakers" (36). When used today, it is mostly used mockingly, or with exaggerated high-pitched voice. This is in fact a regression, that causes invisibility of women. The fact that the masculine form of speech is so well established, makes it hard sometimes even for women to use the feminine form of words. Some women admit to not using the feminine form of words as they are afraid to sound like snobs. In addition, using feminine forms to address mixed audience is failing in reality. There is a minority of female professors and broadcasters that are still trying to implement it, but so far it is not in wide-spread use.

3. **Masculinization** – there is a new trend in Hebrew, trying to lead to masculinization. A great example Muchnik gives is the use of the words *mazkir/mazkira* – which means secretary. When said in the masculine form, it seems as if the person is fulfilling an important job, while the feminine form suggests an "office clerk". Muchnik claim, that as a result of this, some women prefer to be referred to in the masculine form, "because they are perceived as being more prestigious and powerful" (39). I believe that it is possible that the glory of the masculine form of some words is deeply rooted in us, that it might be the reason women use the masculine form from time to time, even when talking about themselves, so they can feel they own this power and prestige.

After reading this, I decided to take a deeper look, and see if the situation is in fact different in 2020. I was scrolling through wanted ads in one of the most common Israeli's websites, hoping to see a different picture than the one I did, although I have to admit that unfortunately I was not surprised by it. When I was searching for jobs in the science field or other positions like management, most of the job requirements were described using the masculine form of words. In just a few ads, there was a line at the bottom, stating that "the ad appeals to both men and women". Kantor and Muchnik claim that "even when double forms are used at the beginning of the advertisement, text, they very often change at the continuation" (35). In addition, only a few ads, but not enough, were worded using the symbol (/) in order to appeal to both sexes. Even though it seems as if the ad is appealing to both sexes due to the use of symbols, it is important to remember that it is still the masculine form that is used first (as mentioned before, Merav Michaeli is doing the opposite thing). This fact is important, since when a person whose first language is Hebrew is reading that kind of a sentence, there is not much meaning to it in the process of reading – it is still read as if it is phrased in the masculine form. This is another example of trying to make something inclusive by phrasing the requirements differently, but still failing to do so. And yet it also serves as an example of how our brain is wired from an early age to have a specific intuition with the language – the intuition that leads one to read something and believing it is meant for male only. At this point, a woman will pass the ad as she will not consider herself fit for the position suggested.

In a different case, while searching for jobs in human resources or administrative positions, the majority of ads were intended for women. In one ad the company is looking for a recruitment coordinator, while already at the beginning it reads "we are looking for a (female) recruitment coordinator to join our family". First, it is only at the bottom line of the ad when it reads that "the ad appeals to both men and women". At this point, we can assume that a man who is reading the ad had already passed on (if he was looking for a job in human resources to begin with). Second,

notice the use of the word *family*. I do not recall seeing in any of the ads appealing to men the use

of this word. It is possible to assume that the use of the word family is not a coincidence, as is it

common, not only in Hebrew and Israel to make the association between a woman and family, and

by that try and make something (in this case a job opportunity) more appealing to women.

As I was reading and thinking about how Hebrew differentiates between a man and a

woman, I realized that it is more than that – it is discriminatory. The language contains endless

terms and words, some implicit and some indirect, which all based on, and are in accordance with

the social norms and assumptions of men superiority over women. This fact essentially leads to a

linguistic sexism (Pauwels 551). The examples above of job search and the ways requirements are

being phrased, strengthening the fact that there is discrimination in employment, and it exemplify

the gendering caused by language, or rather how the discrimination and oppression are reinforced

by the language.

Another interesting angle to think about in Hebrew and its oppressive nature of women, is

the very basic aspect that is often overlooked – small talks. I write these words knowing it is the

case in other languages too, English among them, but there is something with the choice of words

in Hebrew that makes it sound even more offensive to me and maybe other Hebrew-speaking

individuals. For example, while one might say that "these men are having a discussion", the same

one will most likely say that "these women are chatting", and will not choose to use other words, as

talking or discussing. While men will be referred to as nervous or irritated, women will be referred

to as hysterical (a term too well-known to be an oppressive one to women, as it originates from the

Greek word hysterika – uterus, which was later used to describe an emotional state of women in a

derogatory way). Another example is that while men considered as firm and assertive, women with

the same behavior are seen as castrating. Again, it is important to note that the words and phrases

that are being used in Hebrew to describe the situations mentioned above have an oppressive

meaning when it comes to women, while it has an empowering meaning when talking about men.

The official Hebrew dictionary is called *Milon Even Shoshan* – The Even-Shoshan Dictionary, which was first published in 1947. An interesting phenomenon I came to learn while doing this research was the existence of an alternative dictionary called *Milon Even-Shoshana*[8], which contains LGBTQ slang words, and was first introduced by Ronen Peeri in the late 1990's. This alternative dictionary contains words and expressions that were part of the slang used by the LGBTQ society in Israel, which in time developed into a day-to-day language used by this community. The slang is based on words in Hebrew, Arabic, English, Spanish and French, while it also modifies existing words in Hebrew. The most common thing in this slang is the use of the feminine form of words, and sometimes creation of new words in the feminine form. The slang and the dictionary received many criticism, and in recent years many research on this issue started to take place, as part of understanding the development of modern Hebrew and the place of LGBTQ individuals in it. It is safe to say that today, some of the words are part of the modern Hebrew, the mainstream, as heterosexual individuals are familiar and use the slang, to the extant it is incorporated in many mainstream songs and TV shows. I came to learn some of the terms when I was only 14, and today I use some of the words on daily basis, especially but not only, with my friends from the LGBTQ community. It feels as if this "new" language is more inclusive and welcoming to its users.

It seems that for many women, the problem of using a masculine form to talk about feminine things, or being referred to in the masculine form, or more generally – the fact that the masculine form is the dominant and unmarked one in the Modern Hebrew, not only erasing them from society and making them invisible, but also makes them to return to a place where they do not

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[8] Notice the marking of the word with the *a* in the end. It is the feminine form of the name Shoshan.

exist without men. The fact that the majority of the words in its feminine forms originate from a masculine word – essentially means – "you as women cannot separate yourselves from men", there is no independent existence of you as women. It can cause women to socialize in a very specific way, that is degrading for them. According to Andrea Jacobs, "women are used to being addressed in the MASCULINE, but men are not used to being addressed in the FEMININE. Men have the privilege of being associated with the normative SELF in Israeli culture by virtue of the metaphorical relationship between the socio-cultural masculine category and the grammatical MASCULINE category, which is, in turn, associated with the unmarked category of human in prescribed and conventional uses of MIH (Modern Hebrew)" (5).

"It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity" (de Beauvoir 1). Simone de Beauvoir differentiate between sociocultural sex and the biological one in *The Second Sex.* In this research I look at gender as a sociocultural structure, and I also claim that it is language, in this case Hebrew, that has a major influence on the place of women in the Israeli society. It is the language that helps us, or forces us, to make the differentiation in speaking about male or female, and we link social characteristic and gender norms to the language and from the language. It is a fact that Modern Hebrew as used today in the Israeli society is "creating and recreating the unequal relationships between MAN and WOMAN in different cultural contexts" (Jacobs 12). Writing this paper, I do realize that along with the fact that Hebrew is a gendered language, there are also the stigmas and chauvinist ideas about women that have an effect on the way the language it is used. It is not a one-way street, but right now it seems easier to change a language, and by that help to bring a change of ideology.

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