

# Hebrew is a modern, living language

The other day I was talking with Simon Steinberg, a Newark merchant, about the 30th anniversary dinner this Sunday of a group known as Hug Ivri.

Hug Ivri, loosely translated, means, "Hebrew Circle" and the group is composed of about 60 men and women who meet regularly to talk and discuss literature and many other subjects in modern Hebrew.

Steinberg was telling me something about his youthful education in the city of Rovano, Poland. He had attended a super high school, known in Europe as "a gymnasium," which is anything but what the word conveys in English.

A European "gymnasium" is a center of learning, a development of intellect rather than the body.

Anyway, Steinberg was telling me in the most casual way: In the Rovano gymnasium, all our studies were in Hebrew, mathematics, science, geography — and —

Then he floored me: "We also studied Latin and we translated Latin classics into Hebrew."

"You mean," I asked, "you translated Caesar, Cicero and Virgil from Latin into Hebrew?"

"Of course. How else?"



**bill frank**

I whistled in awe. From one dead language with its complications of conjugations, declensions

and syntax, into another dead language with just as many complications?

When I went to the Wilmington High School, I thought it was tough enough translating Caesar, Cicero, Virgil and others into English.

"But," Steinberg caught me up, "who says Hebrew is a dead language? For centuries, true, it was used only as religious and classical language, a Biblical language. But it has been revived as a living language for many, many years." In fact, Steinberg added, "new words are still being added to conversational Hebrew."

I checked this out and found,

sure enough, such examples as the Hebrew "tele-fon" for telephone; and "rah-dio" for radio.

But most beautiful of all, are the Hebrew words for "United States" which literally translated means, "the lands of the covenant."

Also, upon reflection, I came to the conclusion that the average American even casually uses any number of Hebrew words, such as "amen," "hallelujah," "hosanna" and "Sabbath."

And of course, innumerable Hebrew names are in everyday use such as David, Solomon, Isaiah, Mary and John.

Innumerable churches have Hebrew names. One of the most beautiful is Wilmington's Ezion-Mt. Carmel.

However, the Wilmingtonians pronounce it "Ez-zian" with the accent on the "E." In Hebrew it would be "Aye-tzion," accent on the last syllable.

Also, Delaware has towns with Hebrew names such as Bethel, Rehoboth, Lebanon.

Interestingly enough, the ancient seal of Old Swedes Church, the nation's oldest house of worship used continuously, has Hebrew on it and someday, when you pass by the Public Building in Wilmington, look up over the county side outer door. You'll see Hebrew inscribed in the decor.

For centuries, Hebrew was regarded as a classical language, more important for cultured men than Latin or Greek. In fact, there was a time in Europe when a student could not be graduated from a university unless he had a knowledge of Hebrew.

American scholars, particularly during colonial days, were proud of their proficiency in writing or declaiming in Hebrew.

But it was not until the 1880's that the movement was started to give Hebrew the vitality of an everyday language. Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, acclaimed as the pioneer of modern Hebrew, ran into a torrential and bitter opposition from the ultra-orthodox Jews who insisted its everyday use was a desecration of their religious language. They said it should be used only for worship and not for secular purposes.

Nonetheless, the moderization of Hebrew as a living language prevailed.

And now we return to Wilmington. Back in 1945 — this was even before the State of Israel was formed — Harry Bluestone, a fluid Hebrew conversationalist, approached Dr. Philip Birnbaum and suggested the formation of a group of men and women who could speak Hebrew. Bluestone then was director of what is now the Jewish Community Center. Barnbaum, already a nationally



**Ezion-Mt. Carmel Church**  
... "Aye-tzion" in Hebrew

recognized scholar was head of the Associated Hebrew School in Wilmington.

They sent out invitations and the first meeting was held Jan. 6, 1946. Attendance: 12 persons who sat around for an hour speaking only Hebrew.

From that grew the present Hug Ivri which has zoomed in popularity and importance under the guidance of Steinberg.

Sunday's public dinner meeting on the Jewish Community Center near Talleyville will be an exception: English will be spoken and most of the founders will attend.

Steinberg says everyone is welcome and I'd say the only Hebrew word you really should know, if you can't speak the language, is "shalom (peace)". That's about as good a beginning as anything. Unfortunately like the weather, every one talks about "shalom" but there still isn't "shalom."

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