

OUR SERIES ON LEADERS WHO HAVE SHAPED ZIONISM OVER THE LAST 150 YEARS

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda

Eliezer Yitzchak Perlman (later Eliezer Ben-Yehuda) was born in Luzhki, Lithuania. He attended a Jewish elementary school where he studied Hebrew and Tanach from the age of three. Ben-Yehuda's father, a Chabad Chasid, died when Eliezer was five years old. At the age of 13, he was sent to his uncle to attend the yeshiva in Polotsk. The head of the yeshiva, a *maskil* in secret, introduced him to secular literature. To save him from heresy, his uncle sent him to study in Glubokoye, in the Vilna district, where Ben-Yehuda made the acquaintance of Samuel Naphtali Herz Jonas, also a Chabad Chasid, who was writing for Hebrew periodicals. Jonas persuaded him to prepare for secondary school matriculation, and his eldest daughter, Deborah, taught him Russian. After a year of preparation, he entered the Dvinsk Gymnasium, from which he graduated in 1877.

The Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) and the struggle of the Balkan nations for liberation planted in Ben-Yehuda the idea of the revival of the Jewish people on its ancestral soil. He maintained that the Jewish people, like all other peoples, had a historic land and a historic language. What was needed was to actuate a national movement that would restore Israel to its land and to its language. He wrote in the preface to his dictionary: "In those days, it was as if the heavens had suddenly opened, and a clear, incandescent light flashed before my eyes, and a mighty inner voice sounded in my ears: the renascence of Israel on its ancestral soil." He was determined to settle in *Eretz Yisrael*, and in 1878 went to Paris to study medicine so that he might

have a profession to sustain himself. He discussed his plan for a Jewish national movement with some Hebrew writers but they were not interested.

While in Paris, Ben-Yehuda studied various subjects at the Sorbonne University – including the history and politics of the Middle East. It was in Paris that he met a Jew from Jerusalem, who spoke Hebrew with him. It was this conversation that convinced him that the revival of Hebrew as the language of a nation was feasible.



In 1881, Ben-Yehuda immigrated to Palestine, then under Ottoman rule, and settled in Jerusalem. Upon arrival, he officially adopted the pseudonym Ben-Yehuda, which he had previously used in his literary activities. He found a job teaching at the Alliance Israelite Universelle school. Motivated by the surrounding ideals of renovation and rejection of the diaspora lifestyle, Ben-Yehuda set out to develop a new language that could replace Yiddish and other regional dialects as a means of everyday

communication between Jews who moved to Israel from various regions of the world. Ben-Yehuda regarded Hebrew and Zionism as symbiotic: "The Hebrew language can live only if we revive the nation and return it to the fatherland," he wrote.

To accomplish the task, Ben-Yehuda insisted with the Committee of the Hebrew Language that, "In order to supplement the deficiencies of the Hebrew language, the Committee coins words according to the rules of grammar and linguistic analogy from Semitic roots: Aramaic and especially from Arabic roots."

Ben-Yehuda raised his son, Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda (the first name meaning "son of Zion"), entirely in Hebrew. He did not allow his son to be exposed to other languages during childhood. He even berated his wife for singing a Russian lullaby. Ben-Zion thus became the first native speaker of modern Hebrew as a mother tongue.

During World War I, when Jamal Pasha, the Turkish commander in Palestine, outlawed Zionism, Ben-Yehuda left for the United States. There he wrote his book *עד אימתי דברו עברית?* ("Until When was Hebrew Spoken?" 1919). He returned to Palestine in 1919. Together with M. Ussishkin, he prevailed upon Herbert Samuel, the British High Commissioner, to declare Hebrew one of the three official languages of the country.

In December 1922, Ben-Yehuda, 64, died of tuberculosis, from which he suffered most of his life. He was buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. His funeral was attended by 30,000 people. ■