**Jew or Hebrew? The Redefinition of Identity**

**in Zionist Education**

**(Full Text)**

Zionism is a Revolution. The birth of the Zionist movement at the end of the nineteenth century revolutionized Jewish identity. A people scattered throughout the world, made up of religious communities characterized by shared faith and ritual, having experienced a taste of Emancipation which did not, however, succeed in erasing the bitterness of antisemitism, now sought to define itself as a nation in the modern sense, with a language, a country, and political independence[[1]](#endnote-1).

**The return to nature in Zionist thought**

This revolution not only encouraged a change of values but also a transformation of Jewish identity. The Zionist thinkers thus ushered into being a new era symbolized by the New Man, the antithesis of the exilic Jew—not a puny, sickly, over-intellectual scholar lacking bodily strength, but a strong, muscular pioneer engaged in agricultural activity. Zionist education thus inculcated a true return to nature, in a literal as well as a symbolic sense: a new man returning to his ancestral land, once again speaking the language of his forefathers and rejecting intellectual activity in favor of physical labor.

The life and thought of Aaron David Gordon, a philosopher, writer and Jewish educator, who wrote in Hebrew, strongly reflect this ideal.

Born in Ukraine in 1856, he had a religious education, like most Jews in Russia at that time. Although the anti-Jewish pogroms of 1881 persuaded him to adopt the principles of Zionism, it was only in 1904, at the age of forty-eight, that he left for the Land of Israel [[2]](#endnote-2) where he experienced a real change of identity :

 ‘’Here [in the Land of Israel] one has the impression that there is a supreme outpouring from the upper spheres that penetrates the soul, and in particular that of the Jew, a son of nature, who is wholly different from what he is in the lands of exile.’’[[3]](#endnote-3)

This change was not only the result of a personal decision. It was the microcosm of a new collective identity for the Jewish people, an identity which they must create for themselves:

‘’The Jewish people has been completely cut off from nature and imprisoned within the walls of the city for two thousand years. We have been accustomed to every form of life except a life of work. It will require the greatest effort of will for such a people to become normal again […] We must create a new people.’’

On his arrival in the Land of Israel, Gordon joined the new settlements and asked to be employed in agricultural work which he regarded as the only way for man to gain both a spiritual and existential deliverance. He advocated physical activity as a means of elevating the human being, and, like a biblical prophet, preached a new ‘’religion of labour:’’

‘’When you harness yourselves to your work, you will regard the universe as a workshop in which you and nature work in harmony with one heart and one soul […] and there will be many moments when the impression of entirely merging into infinity will present itself […] and you will penetrate the secret of silence and sanctity. And you will feel something that can only be expressed through labour […] and, emanating from your work, you will hear a small voice saying : "Work, men, slave away !" […] and nature, responding to the small voice, will say : " Amen ! Work, men, complete what is lacking in me so that I can complete what is lacking in you" […] And you will receive the Torah [[4]](#endnote-4) of Nature, the doctrine of construction and creation.’’[[5]](#endnote-5)

Paradoxically, the civilisation of this new people that Zionism sought to create had to be different from the one that had been adopted by the Jewish people and which had been defined by its culture. In sociology, culture is defined by what is common to a group of individuals, what it has been taught, what has been transmitted to it, what it has created and produced and what binds it together. In addition to the arts, humanities and science, culture embraces the lifestyles, laws, a system of values, traditions and beliefs along with the distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional characteristics of a society or social group. In philosophy, the word ‘’culture’’ refers to that which differs from nature. As against the concept of a progress from nature to culture, as in Claude Lévi-Strauss's symbolism of “the raw and the cooked,” Aaron David Gordon could propose moving in the opposite direction: abandoning books and Talmudic studies to wield a pickaxe in the Judean hills. In this new concept of identity, the return to nature required religious identity to be refashioned as cultural identity. The exilic Jew was a follower of the Jewish religion based on rabbinic literature, regarded as the essence of Judaism. The Zionist Jew exemplified a return to a natural way of being that preceded the Jewish religion.

Gershom Scholem, a Jewish [historian](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historien) and [philosophe](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophe)r, specialising in [Kabbal](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbale)ah and Jewish mysicism, thought that it was necessary to understand that the secular Zionist revolution was essentially a rebellion against the condition of the Jew in exile :

‘’In that sense, the Orthodox Jews ‘are right’ to criticise Zionism. The Zionists, in fact, rebelled against their ancestors who said that one had to wait for the Messiah […] The difference between Zionism and Messianism is that Zionism operates in history and Messianism remains in utopia. ‘’[[6]](#endnote-6)

In a similar way, in 1903, the literary critic Marcus Ehrenpreis drew attention, in a more concrete manner, to ‘’the rebellion of the younger generation at the heart of our rebirth:’’

‘’It is the sudden eruption of a volcano which destroys in order to reconstruct […] This new generation of Jews differs from the preceding generations by the new language in which it addresses us, by the audacity of its spirit and the unprecedented content of its thought […] Hear the mighty voice of this new generation ! "We have liberated ourselves from the vain and useless spirituality of the exile […] a spirituality that says ‘no’ to all the living and fruitful forms of life. We have liberated ourselves from the rabbinic culture which has erected a wall between ourselves and life itself, a culture that has made our bodies anaemic and deformed our appearance […] We have liberated ourselves from spiritual and moral exile […] We are free !" [[7]](#endnote-7)

The Zionist movement therefore intended to be a secular movemement, as the longed-for return was seen as a return to the natural state which preceded the religious state, originally viewed as a cultural state of affairs. This complex dynamic played with time and semantics: tomorrow's Israeli must be different from the Jew of today and instead revert to the Hebrew of yesterday.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The complexity of the dialectic return to nature in Zionist thought necessitates a rejection of the simplistic rhetoric which regards Zionism as a *fin de siècle* nationalist movement which was modern and therefore secular. The secularity of Zionism is not derived from its modernity but from the dialectic between nature and culture which is integral to its very existence.

**The application in Zionist education**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the national impetus which arose primarily in the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe began to affect the Zionist schools in the Diaspora. It used the incipient education system of the Land of Israel to enlighten the future generations in accordance with this new model of identity.

This new ethos was present in educational manuals, used in schools, promoting the Zionist message as well as in many publications of an informal educational character (produced for youth movements, agricultural communities, etc.), but, as in all texts of an educational kind, what goes unsaid is as important as what is stated explicitly[[9]](#endnote-9).

But the People of the Book remain the People of the Book.

Paradoxically, the New Man drew his inspiration not from nature as such, but from the revealed Bible, the book of the Covenant. In order to do so, the “religious” Bible was de-sacralized, its prescriptive character limited, its historical narrative interpreted in a nationalist light, and its moral significance connected to universal values. The return to nature was thus really a reinterpretation of the founding text of the people of Israel, the Bible. The return to nature was seen as a return to the “natural” Bible, liberated, like the New Man, from the yoke of the Jewish religion and the interpretations of traditional Rabbinic Judaism. It was therefore a reinterpretation of the founding text of the culture of Israel .[[10]](#endnote-10) The traditional teaching of the Bible was limited to the cyclical reading of the first five books and their implications for the practice of Judaism. The new approach to the Bible looked for signs of a mythical connection between the past and present in the landscapes it depicted, and in the central position it gave to agriculture, to the historical narrative and to the moral requirements of society.

The Bible, taught at the beginning of the twentieth century as the basis of identity, is still today compulsory throughout the Israeli educational system. It continues to symbolize the dialectic of the return to nature in Zionist thought.

Access to the scriptures of the Bible was facilitated by the spread of the teaching of Hebrew. Between 1880 and 1914, more than two hundred different school textbooks were published in Europe, in the Americas and, evidently, in the Land of Israel. Their purpose was to bring to life a language which was believed to be dead, used solely for religious purposes. It was thus a matter of resurrecting the Hebrew language and developing a new vocabulary appropriate to the modern era. In this way, Hebrew terms were devised for words such as doll, train, jam, comb, pyjama, to name but a few examples. The use of this language was encouraged in every sphere of daily life. In the introduction to his *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* (1918), Eliezer Ben-Yehudaa wrote :

‘’ Just as the Jews cannot be a living nation unless they return to the land of their ancestors, so they cannot be a living people unless they return to the language of their ancestors and use it not only for their books, worship and philosophy, but also as the daily language of great and small, women and children, young men and women, for all the simple joys of life, at all hours of the day and night, as all peoples do when speaking their own language.‘’ [[11]](#endnote-11)

The sheer number of school textbooks shows the growing interest in the teaching of Hebrew in Zionist education. As Alain Choppin, the French historian of the school textbook said :

“The school textbook is the support of educational content, the depository of knowledge. […] It is thus a pedagogical instrument. […] It is the vehicle […] of a system of values, an ideology, a culture. It participates in this way in the socialisation of the young generations to which it is addressed.” [[12]](#endnote-12)

In this methodological perspective in which knowledge, pedagogy and ideology merge, one should mention one of the progenitors of this pedagogical revolution, Isaac Epstein (1863-1943), the writer of numerous textbooks dedicated to the teaching of the Hebrew language.

Born in Belarus, this writer and linguist was sent in 1886 to one of the settlements of the Baron Rothschild in the Land of Israel. It was there that he began to practice his method of teaching which he called “Hebrew in Hebrew,” and which he claimed was the “natural” way of learning the language.

A first-rate pedagogue, he rejected methods based on the learning of grammar or on compositions and translations with the help of a dictionary. In his opinion, the Hebrew language had to be taught in Hebrew, in progressive stages, in accordance with the age of the pupils. One should begin with fun activities and proceed to lessons instructed by the teacher. The lessons, consisting of conversations and an exchange of questions and answers alongside vocabulary will be based upon the daily life of the children.

But, as Alain Choppin explains, school textbooks do not only have a didactic purpose. They are “the vehicle […] of a system of values, an ideology, a culture.” Behind Epstein’s method, there was an ideology that saw Hebrew as the “natural” language of the Jewish people, and thus teaching them Hebrew was teaching them their mother-tongue.

In the introduction of his principal school textbook, published in Warsaw in 1901, Epstein put forward his ideas as follows :

Our natural language says to us : Schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, do not teach your pupils the elements of the Hebrew language and the principles of its grammar but the usage of the language itself. This goal can only be achieved if you speak to them in that language. Use this language in your lessons like a mother who communicates with her children throughout the day. What do they talk about ? About everything and nothing, about the objects lying in front of them which they use on a daily basis, their size, their colour, their intended purpose. Imitate that mother, but in a more reflective way, and thus Hebrew will become their mother-tongue. Do it so that they do not hear a word from you in their own language, as if it is completely unknown to you. Transform your class, at least for the lesson, into a little country where only Hebrew is spoken. When passing through the school gates, the children will then feel that they are crossing the frontier into this new country. [[13]](#endnote-13)

Paradoxically, the acquired language is seen as a mother-tongue and the natural way of learning the language in the family unit becomes the standard method of teaching it in schools. The Epstein method spread rapidly and was adopted in many schools, as well as in ulpans, and Hebrew lessons for adults continue to be provided for newly arrived immigrants in Israel. [[14]](#endnote-14)

A third application in the field of education concerning the long-desired return to nature in Zionist thought was the introduction of a new subject in the school curriculum of the Jewish people : knowledge of the Land of Israel. This new subject, presented throughout the education system, combines different areas of knowledge : history and geography, flora and fauna, literature and folklore. But its special feature is the way in which it is taught, which is not in class but in nature itself. It is by way of vast excursions on foot, on the initiative of the school and not of a youth movement, that the young people learn to know and love their future country.

This is not a question of leisure activities but rather a school activity which forms part of the process of socialisation of the generations of young people for whom it is intended. [[15]](#endnote-15) It is comparable to the museum or theatre visits which feature in the educational programs of many European schools. Moreover, it is not only an encounter with the national culture in the form of the natural scene of the country but an encounter with the national values, like the lessons of civic instruction which Guizot instituted in elementary schools in France in the nineteenth century.

**Conclusion**

L’éducation sioniste du début du 20ème siècle qui se prolonge, de nous jours, dans l’éducation israélienne a réussi à mettre en application, avec des variantes, le retour à la nature, tant prôné par le mouvement sioniste, malgré sa complexité due à sa dialectique interne.

C’est un nouvel exemple du rôle institutionnel de l’école comme facteur de socialisation. Il nous faut donc appréhender l’histoire de l’école comme une histoire politique, et pas seulement comme une histoire sociale et culturelle.

Comme l’a dit Jules Ferry, le ministre de l’éducation à qui la France doit la loi de l’éducation obligatoire promulguée en 1886 : « Si l’État s’occupe de l’éducation, c’est pour y maintenir une certaine morale d’État, certaines doctrines d’État qui importent à sa conservation. » [[16]](#endnote-16)

1. Denis Charbit, *Qu’est-ce que le sionisme ?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), p. 72. Historiography has generally seen the birth of Zionism to have been the result of a realisation of the failure of emancipation in the face of the renewal of antisemitism. See, for example, Walter Laqueur, *History of Zionism*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994. More recently, it seems that the development of Zionism has been seen in a more complex historical and intellectual context. See, for example, Georges Bensoussan, *Une histoire intellectuelle et politique du sionisme*, Paris, Fayard, 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the introduction to his anthology *Sionismes. Textes fondamentaux*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1998, Denis Charbit expresses uncertainty about the terminology that should be employed in an academic non-political work about Zionism.: « What term should one use for the country towards which all the Zionisms turned and which they embodied ? Israel ? *Eretz-Israël ?* Palestine ? [...] None of these terms can claim to be neutral, objective, objects of dispute that they are. […] What should one do ? If we are to use the term used by the writers, *Eretz-Israël* is the one we would use systematically […] It thus seems to us fair to respect the wishes of the writer, especially when the Land of Israel is mentioned in a romantic, historical and cultural perspective. » (p. XVIII). It is the choice we have also made in this article on account of its historical and cultural orientation, the Land of Israel being the translation of *Eretz-Israël*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Aaron David Gordon, « A letter not sent in his lifetime », translated by par Ami Bouganim and quoted in his brief anthology on Gordon: *Aharon David Gordon. Le Pionnier de la Vie*, Paris, éditions du Nadir, 1996, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The founding text of Judaism, the Torah (the Hebrew root *yara* means teaching) consists of the first five books of the Bible, or the Pentateuch. (This is a note by the writer of this article}.  [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bouganim, *Aharon David Gordon. Le Pionnier de la Vie*, *op. cit,* pp. 40 et 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Eliezer Ben-Ezer, « Le sionisme : la dialectique de la continuité et de la rébellion. Entretiens avec Gershom Scholem », in : *Cahiers de l’Herne*, no. 92 (2009), pp. 44-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Marcus Ehrenpreis, « Literary opinion », *Hashiloach*, vol. XI (1903), published in Charbit, *Sionismes. Textes fondamentaux*, *op. cit*, pp. 277-278. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Avraham B. Yehoshua, *The Wall and the Mountain*, (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, Am Oved, 1989, pp. 206-214. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. * On the rise of the Jewish school network in the Land of Israel in the years 1882-1920 and its ideological dimension, see Doris Bensimon-Donath, *L’éducation en Israël*, Paris, Anthropos, 1975, pp. 29-35, 59-70. On the importance of the youth movements in the Israeli educational ideology, see *idem*., pp. 29-35, pp. 59-70. On the importance of the youth movements in the Israeli educational ideology, see pp. 355-368.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. As the bibliography on this subject is particularly abundant in Hebrew and not in French, I will only mention the excellent translation of the work of Zvi Adar, *The Biblical Narrative*, Jérusalem, OSM, 1960. Zvi Adar directed the teachers’ training college where the Hebrew University of Jerusalem trained teachers to serve in secondary schools and was later Minister of Education. In this book which became a classic of its kind, he used the literary analysis of texts to show how the biblical narrative transformed popular legends into brilliant insights on the meaning of life and the history of a people . [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. « La renaissance de l’hébreu », Charbit, *Sionisme. Textes fondamentaux*, *op. cit*, p. 257. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Alain Choppin, « L’histoire des manuels scolaires. Une approche globale », *Histoire de l’éducation,* n° 9, 1980, pp. 1-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Isaac Epstein, *Hebrew in Hebrew* (Hebrew)*, Warsaw*, Achiassaf publishing house, 1900, p. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. On the ulpan method, see Bensimon-Donath, *L’éducation en Israël*, *op. cit.*, pp. 369-372. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See: Salomon Katz, « The Israeli Teacher Guide : The Emergence and Perfection of Rule » , *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol 12 (1985), pp. 49-71 and Timi Ben-Yossef, *Learning the Land of Israel as an Educational Field in Zionist Culture*, Tel-Aviv, University of Tel-Aviv, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. F. Jacquet-Francillon and others (ed.), *Une histoire de l’école. Anthologie de l’éducation et de l’enseignement en France aux XVIIe-XXe siècles*, Paris, éditions Retz, 2010, p. 619. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)