Hebrew Book Printing and Design in Israel in the Twentieth Century

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1. **Introduction**

During the twentieth century, which changed the course of human history in general and the direction of Jewish history in particular, Jewish book production centers throughout the world either ceased to exist or moved. Hebrew print centers gradually moved to the Land of Israel; today they only exist in the State of Israel. This fascinating historical process is connected to a new secular Hebrew culture’s development and the Jewish people’s spiritual rebirth in its own land, as well as the Second World War and the Holocaust. Exploiting all the different branches of print technology for its development and dissemination, the secular Hebrew book spearheaded the creation of a modern culture in an ancient language. Consequently, the relationship between book art, letter design, and Hebrew printing, and the rebirth of Hebrew culture during the great vicissitudes of the twentieth century is one of reciprocity between two highly significant cultural phenomena that could not have occurred one without the other. Thus, the creation of new Hebrew print type and new typographic and artistic styles and the development of the modern Hebrew book are an inseparable part of the secularization of Jewish culture that occurred over the course of the twentieth century and that found its purest expression in the Land of Israel’s developing Hebrew community. Therefore, the twentieth century history of the Hebrew Book and Hebrew printing in Palestine and subsequently in the State of Israel constitutes an important part of the story of modern secular Hebrew culture’s creation.

**2. Hebrew Printing in the Land of Israel at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century**

Until the end of the eighteenth century, few non-Muslim printing houses existed in the Ottoman Empire, especially in Middle Eastern lands, due to a distrustful, occasionally even hostile, attitude towards printing in Islamic lands. Religious considerations connected to maintenance of hegemonic control over sacred texts’ wording and aesthetic considerations tied to preference for manuscripts over the more impoverished appearance of printed books impeded printing’s spread. Copyists’ high status and the low literacy rate amongst the general population also contributed to print’s delayed penetration.

Hebrew printers in the Land of Israel faced the same political and economic difficulties the non-Jewish population did. Until the First World War, only a few printing houses owned by Christians and Muslims existed there, and they were found mostly in Jerusalem. Until the mid-nineteenth century, various restrictions placed on the printing of Arabic books slowed print production’s introduction into Islamic lands, and almost no Arabic books were printed in the Land of Israel until the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, Christian-owned printing houses, which were concentrated in Jerusalem, catered primarily to the local population’s religious needs. Consequently, most of the Land of Israel’s printing houses operated as part of monasteries and European missionary institutions. Predating the first Hebrew press, the Armenian Church’s printing house, established in 1833, was, in practice, the Land of Israel’s first printing house.

**2.1 The Beginning of Change: Up until World War One**

When the pioneers of the Second Aliyah (1904-1914) arrived in Palestine, the history of Hebrew printing in the Land of Israel started to change. A new generation, imbued with a sense of national mission and espousing various revolutionary socialist ideologies, these pioneers viewed the printed word as a primary tool for advancement of their aims. Soon, the growing tension between these young people, who abandoned religious commandments, and members of the Old Yishuv, who felt that the pioneers and their political and ideological beliefs did not belong, prevented the continued printing of pioneer publications on the printing presses of more veteran Jerusalemites. Young recently arrived East European-born pioneers began to open small print shops that operated alongside existing ones that had been opened by learned Jerusalemites of the Old Yishuv, such as A.M. Luncz, I.D. Frumkin, ‘Azri’el Printing House, and Cherezli Printing House.

The Young Turk Revolution took place in the summer of 1908, and, in its wake, restrictions on the granting of permits for the publication of newspapers were eased and the censorship of printed matter was almost completely lifted. These changes served as impetus for the establishment of *’Aḥdut* [Unity] Printing House in Jerusalem in 1910. It not only altered the attitude towards secular and Zionist literature in the Land of Israel, but it also changed the way that Palestinian Hebrew print workers organized themselves. Thus, its opening marked a new stage in Palestinian Hebrew printing. During its first years of activity, the printing house played an important role in the history of Modern Hebrew literature by printing some of the earliest works by S.Y. Agnon, Y.H. Brenner, and ’Aharon Re’uveni. Furthermore, as the first cooperative printing house, it did not have private owners dictating its activity. Its employee owners chose their own work. In fact, the printing house was established by the social democratic workers’ party *Po‘ale Siyon* (Workers of Zion); it was intended to serve as a means through which the party would disseminate its ideas. A strike and protest activities that became milestones in the history of Palestinian Jewish labor organization accompanied the printing house’s opening.

’Aharon ’Itin’s printing house in Jaffa constituted a parallel institution, even if it was not party-affiliated. ’Avraham Ḥayyim Zilberman (Kaspi) and Mordeḵai ’Edelman had established the first Hebrew printing house in Jaffa in 1888, but it only operated for a short time, because, at that time, Jaffa’s Jewish community was small and economically weak. In addition, Turkish authorities persecuted it. The owner of a large printing house in the Russian city of Bryansky, ’Itin (1864-1930) immigrated to Palestine in 1907. Since he planned to continue working as a printer, he brought his small printing press with him. Thanks to ratification of the Turkish constitution in 1908, it proved less onerous for ’Itin to obtain an official permit to open his printing house; in 1909, he began to publish Hebrew books, as well as the weekly newspaper of *ha-Po‘el ha-ṣa‘ir* (The Young Worker) Party, one of the central Palestinian Zionist periodicals of the time.

In fact, ’Itin Press brought about two important revolutions in secular Palestinian Hebrew culture’s history whose impact are still recognizable today: The creation of a literary-publishing center in Jaffa capable of competing with the Jerusalem center and the shifting of the center of gravity of Hebrew journalism from the mountains to the coastal plain. Alongside his printing house, ’Itin opened a bookbindery and a store for stationary wares, writing utensils, and seals. These institutions also served Jaffa’s non-Jewish population, including Ottoman governmental institutions.

**2.2 Summary: Print Art and Typography in the Land of Israel prior to the British Conquest**

Despite the significant role in the history of Palestinian Hebrew publishing and journalism played by ‘Itin’s Jaffa printing house, *Po‘ale Siyon*’s Jerusalem printing house, and other printing houses that subsequently opened, from an objective standpoint, these were only a handful of production plants operating with primitive outdated equipment.

In total, three printing houses operated in Jaffa. They possessed five printing presses. None of these outdated machines were electric-operated and they could not perform large-scale or high-quality print jobs. Prior to World War One, one hundred workers operated thirteen printing presses and a lithograph machine in Jerusalem.[[1]](#footnote-1) Palestinian Hebrew book publishers operated in a geopolitical environment that did not value typography and the art of printing and they were forced to rely on meager and outdated equipment. Consequently, they lagged far behind European and American publishers able to take advantage of huge advancements in the fields of typography and print art.

The general stagnation in Hebrew typography that lasted until after World War One ended was characterized by reduced paper and print quality and an overall lack of decoration and ornamentation. Furthermore, the Old Yishuv’s conservative attitude to the printed word inhibited change and innovation. Its members viewed physical books as mere platforms for the sacred texts they conveyed. Therefore, they assigned secondary significance, or, frequently, no significance at all to their external appearance. Finally, Palestine’s Jewish residents, most of whom suffered from poverty and serious existential difficulties, were too preoccupied to look for aesthetic enjoyment from books or to view it as an important need.

**3. The First Palestinian Hebrew Printing House during the British Mandate Period**

**3.1 The First Decade: The Age of Hopes, 1919-1928.**

Britain’s gradual conquest of the Land of Israel in late 1917 and early 1918 and publication of the Balfour Declaration, with its promised establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people in Palestine,” in November 1917 opened a new chapter in Zionist history. The historical momentum that was created gave world Jewry the sense that the time for practical realization of the Zionist visionhad arrived. In many people’s opinion, it was now time to take practical steps to build the spiritual center for the Jewish people envisioned by Zionist thinker Ahad Ha-Am in Jerusalem.

During World War One, it was not just the Palestinian Hebrew book industry that suffered total destruction. The Bolshevik Revolution and the political and military vicissitudes of the war led to the destruction and closure of most centers of Hebrew book production that had operated in the Russian Empire and Central Europe until 1914. The shortage of prayer books, traditional Jewish religious texts, and Hebrew textbooks, and the limited possibilities for distribution of modern Hebrew literature as the field expanded raised the idea of establishing a world center for Hebrew book production in Jerusalem. In 1919-1920, a plan took shape to establish a special Jerusalem neighborhood where modern printing houses, binderies, and shopping centers for paper, printed materials, and more, would be concentrated and that would constitute a world center for the Hebrew book industry. Many sources, including donations from American Jews, were supposed to finance this huge undertaking. In the end, however, it never got off the ground. Huge waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine never materialized and the East European Hebrew literary center wandered westward and established itself in Germany.

**3.2 Publishing’s Role in Development of the Hebrew Book**

The first Hebrew publishing houses that emerged in Warsaw and Odessa during the final decade of the nineteenth century were an important part of Hebrew language and literature’s rebirth. Their establishment and activities were inextricably linked to the history of a modern secular Hebrew literature. In fact, their modelling of their production process on that of contemporary modern European publishing houses that is attested to by the Hebrew books they produced constitutes part of the modernization and secularization processes underway in Jewish society. Secular books were no longer just tools lacking intrinsic worth whose significance paled in comparison with sacred texts that aided the individual in prayer or Torah study.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, there were twelve active publishing houses in Palestine; they dealt with the printing, distribution, and sale of different types of printed material, primarily pamphlets and journals. Nonetheless, due to the limited nature of these operations, no truly noteworthy Hebrew publishing houses could be said to have existed in Palestine. Efforts to really get Hebrew publishing off the ground in the 1920s required creation of the necessary technical infrastructure and a stable secular-literature-consuming reading public. For many years, the secular Palestinian Jewish intelligentsia had found it difficult to economically support those working in the book industry. Nonetheless, it kept abreast of developments within it. Thus, when this intelligentsia, which constituted a relatively high proportion of the secular Palestinian Jewish population, successfully created the sense that works of literature, thought, and research written in the Land of Israel had great resonance and pushed readers to take part in the growing circle of local authors and readers, it helped create conditions conducive to Palestinian Hebrew publishing’s growth.

Only six original Hebrew works were published in the Land of Israel in 1920, but, at the very same time, Hebrew publishing houses were popping up in Western Europe like mushrooms after the rain.[[2]](#footnote-2) At these publishing houses, Hebrew book production’s aesthetic and artistic side were given emphasis for the first time. Purely economic considerations and unprecedented technological advancements made in the German print industry in the period underlay these publishing houses establishment on German soil.

The 30 Hebrew publishing houses that operated in the Weimar Republic between 1921 and 1924 revolutionized how people related to Hebrew books. Hebrew books became both consumer products possessing aesthetic characteristics and works of art. Modern printing and binding techniques aided printers in emphasizing Hebrew books’ external appearance for the first time in generations. New phenomena, such as Hebrew bibliophilic books and Hebrew art books, emerged and found a supportive audience and many imitators. In addition, the Hebrew typographic world underwent a revival that brought about the creation of new fonts which gradually replaced older ones. Secular Hebrew books steadily differentiated themselves from traditional prayer books and religious texts. Their external appearance and their aesthetic language were more modern, sophisticated, and rich. Influenced by contemporary European editions, secular Hebrew books featured new elements, such as designed paper covers, original illustrations, and sophisticated calligraphy, that had never been used in Hebrew books before.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Hebrew book underwent a five-year revolution in the Weimar Republic that left its mark on Hebrew books for generations. Yet, when the German economy stabilized in 1924, the Berlin literary center collapsed.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**3.3 Hebrew Journalism’s Role in Printing’s Development in Palestine**

During the early 1920s, Palestinian Hebrew publishing developed primarily in the field of journalism, because the Hebrew publishers operating in Europe and America dominated the book trade. On August 8, 1919, the first issue of the daily newspaper *Do’ar ha-yom* (The Daily Mail) appeared. It was edited by Itamar Ben-Avi, an experienced journalist and the son of spoken Hebrew revivalist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. In his paper, he represented the “Yishuv’s children,” native-born Palestinian Jews and the secular immigrant population whose residence in Palestine predated the arrival of the pioneers of the Second Aliyah in 1904. The first issue of the daily newspaper *Ḥadashot ha-’ares* (The Palestinian News) had appeared only two months earlier, on June 18, 1919. It was an iteration of an earlier British military newspaper and its appearance had been initiated by a group of Russian Zionists in Petrograd. Effort to merge these papers proved unsuccessful. These two daily newspapers, whose editorial staffs set up shop in close proximity to one another outside Jerusalem’s old city walls in the heart of its developing Jewish community, represented completely different readerships. Unsurprisingly, friction and undisguised competition developed between them.

Itamar Ben-Avi accomplished something remarkable in the history of Palestinian Hebrew printing in the summer of 1920. With British Jewish businessman and philanthropist Ben-Zion Rubinstein’s financial aid, he brought three modern Intertype typesetting machines to Palestine that he purchased from the British newspaper mogul Lord Northcliff. Ben-Avi formed a partnership with other investors and *ha-Solel* [The Paver] Partnership established an up-to-date printing house. This development was so significant that the local intellectual elite and the British regime’s leading officials, including the High Commissioner for Palestine Lord Herbert Samuel, attended the printing house’s celebratory opening. *ha-Solel* Press’s Intertype machines were the first electric typesetting machines in Palestine; until the establishment of Jerusalem’s first power station in 1926, a modified gasoline motor was employed to generate the energy necessary for their operation. In addition to publishing the newspaper *Do’ar ha-yom*, *ha-Solel* Press briefly published two short-lived newspapers in other languages, the Arabic newspaper *Brid el-Yom* (The Daily Mail) and the English weekly “Palestine Weekly.”

Despite *ha-Solel* Press’s successes, fewer book were being printed in Palestine and local newspapers found it impossible to expand their total readership beyond tens of thousands of readers. Yet Hebrew printing houses, particularly those in Jerusalem, were able to stay afloat by taking on increasing amounts of work for the city’s governmental and political institutions. The various institutions established in the capital by the mandatory government and the Zionist Organization and its various branches, as well as private offices, were the principle clients of *ha-’are*ṣ (The Land) Press, which operated in Jerusalem until moving to Tel Aviv in 1922, and *ha-Solel* Press. The Palestinian Hebrew community’s internal political development led to the establishment of several printing houses earmarked for the printing of party publications. Important examples of this include *Defus ha-po‘alim* (The Workers’ Press), established in Jerusalem in 1922 to serve the institutions of the Histadrut labor federation, and *ha-Po‘el ha-ṣa‘ir* (The Young Worker) Press and *ha-’aḥdut* (The Unity) Press established in Tel Aviv.

An additional development in the history of Palestinian Hebrew publishing took place when Michael Pikovsky (1866-1943) and his son Emil (1899-1984) arrived in the country in 1924. Until then, the printing of pictures and illustrations in Palestine was extremely limited and very expensive, because Palestine lacked a factory for production of printing plates and they needed to be ordered from factories outside of Palestine, primarily Western European ones. Having owned and operated a manufacturing plant for Zinc printing plates (Zincography) for 30 years in Odessa, Michael Pikovsky purchased advanced printing plate production equipment in Germany that he used when he and his son opened the first printing plate factory in Palestine in Jerusalem. This factory produced a substantive change in the printed materials produced in Palestine. When increasing numbers of pictures were integrated into books, pamphlets, newspapers, and journals, their appearance began to increasingly resemble printed materials published abroad. To cultivate and publicize his printing plate factory, Pikovsky established *ha-Mizraḥ* (The East), the first illustrated Palestinian Hebrew journal employing the same format as popular illustrated weeklies then being published in Europe and the United States. Nonetheless, until the 1930s, printing plate production’s slow pace prevented the introduction of pictures into daily Palestinian Hebrew papers.

**3.4 The Third Aliyah and the Hebrew Literary Center’s Move to Palestine**

When the German hyperinflation got reined in and the favorable economic conditions that had enabled Weimar Republic’s Hebrew printing and publishing center to thrive disappeared, the center entered into immediate decline. 1924 brought the closure of Berlin’s Hebrew publishing houses one by one and Hayim Nahman Bialik’s decampment for Palestine. He began to build a home in Tel Aviv; he worked to position his publishing house *Devir* (Holy of Holies) as a national publishing house. When Bialik, the undisputed leader of the contemporary Hebrew literary republic, arrived in Palestine in marked the beginning of final stage in the European Hebrew literary center’s transition of Palestine. Numerous authors and poets followed Bialik’s example and immigrated to Palestine. With the Fourth Aliyah period began, many of the most important European Hebrew publishers joined them in Palestine.

Shoshana Parsitz numbered among these Fourth Aliyah immigrants; she reopened *‘Omanut* (Art) Publishing House in Palestine. The publishing house, whose primary focus was children’s and young adult literature, had been founded in Moscow in 1917 and had started to operate actively in Frankfurt in 1921. It had a regular staff of authors, poets, illustrators, and editors who set new production standards for Hebrew children’s art books. In Palestine, Parsitz consolidated her activities in central Tel Aviv and immediately set about building a state-of-the-art printing house. This was the first time that someone had endeavored to conduct large-scale modern publishing activity in Palestine employing the same methods used in large European publishing plants. *‘Omanut* Publishing House’s connections with Zionist institutions, especially the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund, enabled it to position itself for many years as the nation’s leading children’s educational publishing house in Palestine.

Yet, *Devir* and *‘Omanut*, established publishing houses that arrived in Palestine with large backlists of high-quality titles and large professional staffs, as well as wide possibilities for production and printing at their disposal, stood in marked contrast with the private publishing houses that were then developing by fits and starts in Palestine. *Miṣpeh* (Overlook) Press, the first independent publishing house established in Palestine during the Mandatory period, operating on a much more modest scale. Nonetheless, it faced many obstacles and only insured its economic survival by operating a number of book stores it owned.

**3.5 Efforts to Create a Local Hebrew Avant-garde and a “Land of Israel” Style**

The elegant and conservative bourgeois style Hebrew publishing houses in Germany employed to produce restrained Hebrew books did not suite the tastes and spirit of most of the local Hebrew reading public when publishers brought it to Palestine in the 1920s. A wide stylistic and conceptual gap separated an older generation composed of those who had been involved in early twentieth century Hebrew publishing in Russia from the community of young pioneers and workers who came of age in Palestine; this gap manifested itself in the different attitudes that they maintained to Hebrew books’ external appearance. The young pioneers and workers aspired to find the revolutionary spirt that many of them brought from Russia and the aesthetic principles of the various modernist movements that many of them espoused expressed in contemporary Palestinian publications’ design. Working class readers constituted the principle contemporary audience for books; bibliophilic books and collector’s edition books, as well as ornate bindings and fonts inspired by ancient manuscripts, did not suit this audience’s taste. In contrast with established publishers who looked to fashion books’ external appearance to suit the taste of the affluent bourgeoisie, small groups of avant-garde creators, mostly of whom were poets, endeavored to overwhelm their readers with sharp daring statements enhanced through use of graphic art full of geometric shapes and sharp angles. Publishing houses such as *Hedim* (Reverberations) Press and *Sadan* (Anvil) Press, which Uri Tzvi Greenberg used as a platform for publication of his innovative expressionist poetry, contributed a short but meaningful chapter to the history of efforts to introduce expressionistic style into Hebrew book culture.

The local art sphere’s development, especially after foundational third group exhibit of Land of Israel artists in the Tower of David, led to the first efforts to publish modern Hebrew art albums in Palestine. Nonetheless, these collections of reproductions were a pale imitation of the elegant albums published in Berlin only a short time earlier. The print and binding industries in Palestine were not yet sufficiently developed to produce art books, a new genre in the Hebrew book world that was only gradually developing an audience.

In early January 1930, the *’Omanut Ereṣ-Yisra’el* (Land of Israel Art) Press Building was dedicated in central Tel Aviv. It was the first Palestinian building designed and built for a printing house in accordance with advanced international standards. The state-of-art printing machines that were imported from Germany constituted the most advanced machines of their kind in Palestine. They included the first linotype machine that could print punctuated Hebrew texts. Together with this technological innovation, Parsitz’s printing house brought new Hebrew fonts to Palestine that had only recently been cast in Germany and Austria. These developments marked the end of a decade full of ups and downs in the history of Palestinian Hebrew printing and book production. In spite of the economic and political crises that befell Palestine in the 1920s, the number of printing houses increased to more than 30 with more than 400 workers working in them by the end of the decade.

Since most Hebrew publishing houses were concentrated in its borders, a rapidly developing Tel Aviv became the center of Hebrew book production. Of the 35 publishing houses active in Palestine in 1930, the four largest publishing houses, *Devir*, *’Omanut*, *Shtibel*, and *Miṣpeh*, operated in the first Hebrew city. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the relative increase in printing plants and publishing houses does not testify to a genuine book industry. With the exception of the four large printing houses, most of Palestinian Hebrew printing houses were very small and they were equipped with primitive obsolete machinery. In practice, the proliferation of small printing plants increased competition and led to a decline in the quality of printed material produced in Palestine. Most printers did not consult with design professionals and experts concerning typography and their individual decisions resulted in Hebrew books with slipshod typographic design. With the beginning of the Fifth Aliyah in 1933 and the arrival of new immigrants from Central Europe, this situation rapidly changed.

**3.6 1933-1939 Years of Immigration and Tremendous Development**

Anti-Semitism’s increasing strength in Europe and Hitler’s rise to power led to what is commonly referred to as “The Fifth Aliyah,” a large wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine that peaked in the mid-1930s. A Palestinian Jewish community of less than 170,000 people absorbed more than 200,000 immigrants. Despite the fact that most of these immigrants emigrated from East European lands, especially Poland, the 50,000 immigrants who arrived from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia placed their distinctive stamp on the Palestinian Hebrew community. Consequently, this immigration wave is considered the most German immigrant wave. Alongside the tremendous contributions that the “yekkes” made to the development of medicine, architecture, music, the academy, and many additional fields in Palestine, a small group of them made a significant contribution to a new chapter in the history of Hebrew printing, Hebrew books, and the Hebrew letter. Central European immigrants became pioneers that brought about distinctive changes in the graphic arts, book design, and Hebrew typography.

During the 1930s, professional graphic artists such as Otte Wallish, Franz Kraus, Rudolph Deutsch (Re’uven Dayan), Gabriel and Maxim Shamir, Shabtai Rubin, Franziska Baruch, and Yerachmiel Schechter arrived in Palestine. They brought professional knowledge and performative abilities with them that had previously been lacking in the small Hebrew community. These professionals’ design of propaganda posters, notices, and advertisements for official Zionist institutions and commercial companies constituted their first significant contribution. The new professional standards that they brought with them prompted the redesign of figures and symbols that had long been fixtures of the Palestinian Zionist visual world.

**3.7 Bezalel as an Influential Player in Book Design Development**

The reopening of Jerusalem’s Bezalel Art Academy in 1935 marked another important milestone in the history of Palestinian Hebrew book and letter design. Josef Budko (1888-1940), the director of the “New Bezalel,” was himself one of the most important graphic designers in the Jewish art world, and the topic of Hebrew letter and book design was close to his heart. Initially, the new school, intended, on one hand, to continue the pioneering undertaking of Boris Schatz while, on the other hand, preparing a new generation of Palestinian Hebrew artists and craftsmen and integrating pure art and practical craft, opened just two departments: a metalworking department and a department of practical graphic arts. Re’uven Dayan (Rudolph Deutsch), who was appointed the head of the Practical Graphic Arts Department when it was established, was long one of the pillars of the “New Bezalel.” He endeavored to develop his students’ typographic consciousness through in-depth study of manuscripts and older print forms that exposed them to the Hebrew letter’s historical development and hands-on study of the functional relationship between the implement and the writing it produced to encourage their creation of new forms appropriate to modern demands. In 1935, Deutsch-Dayan numbered among the founders of “The Union of Palestinian Hebrew Artists for Practical Graphic Arts,” the first professional organization of its kind in the Land of Israel. In addition to bringing graphic designers together, it made a notable contribution to how people understood the design of visual communication through the mounting of exhibits and other promotional activities. The propaganda wave that accompanied World War Two confirmed the importance of increasingly sophisticated graphic media and brought about innovative experiments intended to create modern Hebrew typographies suitable for contemporary needs. Slightly later, in 1942, Mordecai Ardon (Bronstein), who directed the “New Bezalel” after Josef Budko’s death, turned to Yerachmiel Schechter and asked him to create a subdepartment for typography in which fields related to the printed letter’s design would be taught in depth. During the 1942-1943 academic year, the renowned English typographer Harry Carter (1901-1982) was among those who taught in this subdepartment; he and his students even designed a new Hebrew font.

Beginning at the end of the 1930s, a new link in the production chain of Palestinian Hebrew books was forged, and, in the years to come, it would capture an increasingly central role: the graphic designer. In spite of the innovation and modern tidings that secular Hebrew literature brought with it, its design and visual aesthetics resembled those of sacred literature which was published in the same manner that it had been published for generations with almost identical typographic design and font choices and a carefree attitude towards binding and external appearance. Only in the late twentieth century, particularly after the digital revolution, would sacred book publishers develop their own aesthetic language and distinct typographic style and emerge as a distinct phenomenon in the Jewish book world.

When Hebrew publishers began to understand the importance of books’ aesthetic forms and contracted the services of graphic artists, designers, and typographers, it constituted a true turning point in how people related to Hebrew books’ external appearance. In addition to their creators, the book-reading public had developed a more refined and particular taste that it employed when selecting books to read. During World War Two, simultaneous with the destruction of more established European Hebrew print centers, the Palestinian Hebrew book market developed at a rapid pace; growing competition led to the introduction of new features into Hebrew book design that had previously been uncommon in this market’s spartan landscape. The book cover constituted one of the most important of these elements. Beginning in the second quarter of the twentieth century, the design art of this book “packaging,” which served as an advertisement and a means for drawing in readers, progressively developed in Europe and the United States. A direct link exists between the development of practical graphic arts and propaganda in Palestine in the late 1930s and the 1940s and the development of Hebrew book covers that became more colorful and richer in original imagery. The same graphic artists, primarily emigrants from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, who were responsible for creating a new visual language for propaganda posters and Hebrew advertisements, designed many of these book covers. The graduates of the first classes of the “New Bezalel,” most of whom had also emigrated from Central Europe, promoted the gospel of originality and innovation first heralded by these veteran graphic designers. Among these graduates, Emmanuel Grau, Elly Gross, and Eliyahu Price prove particularly noteworthy. They went on to work alongside Franz Kraus, Otte Wallish, and Franziska Baruch; over the course of the 1940s, as part of the first generation of Palestinian book cover designers, they designed hundreds of spectacular Hebrew book covers. The first generation of Palestinian book cover designers placed emphasis on the illustrative aspect, proficiency in which they freely demonstrated, as well as daring experimentation in how forms of Hebrew letter would be realized and suited to the illustrative style.

The breathtaking colorfulness that quickly changed the Hebrew book’s character was also the result of a development that took place in the field of printing in Palestine. Levin Epstein Press’s purchase of Palestine’s first offset printing machine constituted an important milestone. This printing house and the technicality possibilities for quality color printing that it offered assumed significance, because they changed the form of the children’s books being printed in Palestine. Beginning in the late 1930s, children’s books with colored illustrations ceased to be an unusual phenomenon, and, thanks to offset printers, their production became easier and less expensive. Until then, books with colored illustrations were produced using an artistic stone press system. Consequently, they were expensive and relatively rare. A short time late, *Grafikah* (Graphic Arts) Printers in Jerusalem purchased an additional offset printer that was operated out of *Bate Bezalel* (Bezalel Houses). Nahum Lipshitz, one of the pioneers of modern printing in Jerusalem, who specialized in the production of quality artistic advertisements, purchased a state-of-the-art intaglio printing machine in the late 1930s that made it possible to make quality prints of paintings and pictures without printing plates.

In addition to the development of extent printing houses in the latter half of the 1930s, the Palestinian printing industry also expanded through the opening of new printing plants. Intertype and Linotype machines gradually replaced manual typesetters, and the printing industry progressively developed. Over the course of the 1940s, the workers’ parties and the kibbutz movement played a critical role in this process.

**4. The 1940s: A Boom in the Shadow of War**

Surprisingly, during the Second World War, when the emergency regulations that the Mandatory government put in place restricted the use of paper, the Palestinian Hebrew publishing world underwent unprecedented expansion and development. *Sifriyat po‘alim* (Workers’ Library), the publishing house of the *Kibbutz arṣi* [Nationwide Kibbutz] movement was established in November 1939, and, a year later, *ha-Kibbutz ha-me’uḥad* (The United Kibbutz) Press began operation. In 1941, *‘Am ‘oved* (Working Nation) Press published its first book, and, in the coming years, it would become one of the largest and most important Palestinian Hebrew publishers. These three important publishing houses were supported by large party organizations of the Palestinian Hebrew workers’ movements, and their establishment marked Palestinian Hebrew publishing’s transition from private initiative to public enterprise. They joined two publishing houses that were established a few years earlier with partial official support. The Zionist Organization contributed money for *Mossad Bialik* (Bialik Institute) Publishing House’s foundation in 1935 and *Mossad Rav Kook* (Rabbi Kook Institute) Publishing House’s establishment in 1938. The power and influence of these publishing houses derived not just from the support that they received from large political organizations that they represented and in whose name they operated, but also due to the efficient and systematic organization that undergirded them and insured a balanced and professional division of labor between those performing different jobs at the press, In fact, these publishing houses operated like other large modern factories throughout the world did. Alongside authors, poets, translators, and editors, who were an indispensable part of each of these publishing houses’ staffs, one found graphic designers and artists who were hired to give each publisher’s books a unified artistic direction and distinguishing external characteristics that would set them apart aesthetically. Consequently, the modern Israeli publishing industry’s established publishing houses are known not just for their subscription plans for book series in different areas of knowledge, established in accordance with their editors’ ideological outlooks, but also for their trademarks and their book covers’ precise design. First printed using substandard materials amidst the restrictions dictated by the conditions of World War Two and the developing Palestinian printing industry, these book covers reflect the effervescent creativity of a small group of artists responding to the challenge of creating a national graphic culture and a distinct aesthetic language for the modern Hebrew book. The book covers produced for the *‘Am ‘Oved* Publishing House in the 1940s by Franz Kraus, Yaakov Rosner, and Arieh Allweil, who also designed the publisher’s trademarks, exemplify this. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the interiors and texts of Hebrew books still suffered from uninspired design and featured innumerable typographic defects.

The first regular efforts to publish art books and bibliophilic books occurred in the 1940s. Most of these efforts were initiated by small private art-loving publishers who had experience putting out quality publications. *Gazit* (Hewn Stone) Press, founded in 1937 by poet and art critic Gabriel Talphir, together with an art journal bearing the same name, and *Sifre Tarshish* (Tarshish Books) Press, founded by Dr. Moshe Spitzer, constitute two notable examples of this.

In the 1940s, alongside the belles lettres and scientific literature produced by institutional publishers, non-canonical literature, primarily detective fiction, adventure fiction, popular science, and romance novels, was produced on an increasingly large scale. This was mostly translated literature intended as cheap and easy entertainment for the masses; it was printed in extremely thin small-format booklets that were published on a regular basis by small unestablished publishers that operated in formalized cooperation or partnership with specific printing houses. By their very nature, these booklets were produced on cheap newspaper with little concern for their typographic quality or their external appearance. In most cases, their cover images were unoriginal and were either copied from the original booklets from which their texts were translated or from alternative sources employing a vulgar sloppy design appropriate to the genre. The fact that thousands of copies were produced for each installment of series produced at the Alexander Moses Printing House, such as *Sifriyat balash* (Detective Library), or by the *ha-Roman ha-za‘ir* (Tiny Novel) Publishing House testifies to these series’ commercial success and the Palestinian Hebrew reading public’s desire for pulp fiction.

Simultaneous with the increasingly rapid development of this layered system of secular culture over the course of a few decades, the religious book world continued to exist almost unchanged. Prayer books, halakhic tracts, and rabbinic literature were published in almost the same manner that they had been published in the late nineteenth century. The conservative character of orthodox society that rejected any modification in the external appearance of books, and, in many cases, sanctified the typographic arrangement of specific books in the same manner that they had been printed for generations dictated their printing, unchanged, in stereographic and photographic editions. Only during the last quarter of the twentieth century and, with increasing forcefulness, in the early twenty-first century, when state-of-the-art design and printing technologies penetrated into the religious book world and ultra-orthodox publishers and printers adopted a new distinctive design language, did this state of affairs change.

In summary, in the decade prior to the State of Israel’s establishment, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv assumed the place formerly occupied by the established European Hebrew print centers. For the first time in history, more Hebrew books were printed in the Land of Israel than outside of it; the shift of Hebrew literary activities, as well as Hebrew printing, to Palestine became a fait accompli. The infrastructure was put in place for the book industry’s regular operation in a normal civil society. This was achieved through the establishment of tens of new printing houses, some of which possessed advanced technological equipment, concentrated mostly in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and the opening of publishing houses that reflected the normal complex stratification of a civil society of readers consuming a full gamut of books. This diversity started with canonical literature that was printed with great precision for the fastidious, moved on to textbooks, literary works, scientific literature, political tracts, and user manuals, and concluded with pulp fiction, a relatively new Hebrew literary genre, that developed from and was also nourished by the tremendous development that occurred as a result of the revival of the Hebrew language and its entrenchment as the everyday language of tens of thousands of Jews.

Thanks to Palestine’s geopolitical status during World War Two, and, despite the censorship and restrictions on paper imports imposed by the British government, the Palestinian printing and publishing industry underwent an unprecedented boom in the mid-1940s. In 1943, more than 400 new Hebrew titles appeared in the Land of Israel; initial attempts were made to design new Hebrew fonts, principally for the titles of newspapers and journals whose number was progressively increasing. The British army and government’s need for the services of local printing houses contributed significantly to the field’s development.

**5. The Hebrew Book during the State of Israel’s First Decade**

In 1949, with the signing of ceasefire agreements and the Independence War’s conclusion, the State of Israel faced a serious economic crisis. On one hand it needed to immediately address the needs of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who arrived in the young state with only the clothes on their backs, but on the other hand the destruction caused by the continued hostilities put an end to the Hebrew printing and book publishing industry’s accelerated development. The files of the Rationing and Supply Ministry and the correspondence between the Commodity and Inventory Division and the printing and publishing houses reveals the inability of the young State of Israel’s governing institutions to aid in the budgeting of foreign currency for the necessary purchase of paper and importation of machine parts and equipment for printing. Nevertheless, despite the deep material crisis, the austerity, and the poverty that beset the young state, important publishing projects arose and pivotal developments in Hebrew typography began.

During the summer of 1949, the first volume of Encyclopaedia Hebraica, one of the most ambitious publishing projects in Hebrew book history, appeared. Despite the war conditions in besieged Jerusalem under which the editorial staff operated from 1947, its members assembled the best scholars in all areas of knowledge, in Israel and the world, to write high-quality academic entries. Completed following approximately thirty years of work, and, in the end, composed of thirty-two thick volumes, rather than the eight volumes that were initially planned, Encyclopaedia Hebraica entered the elite group of large national encyclopedias, most of which had generations-long histories. First and foremost, its very appearance put an end to doubts and debates about the Hebrew language’s ability to serve as a rich and flexible modern language in which high-quality scholarship could be written.

Encyclopaedia Hebraica not only constituted a monumental intellectual achievement, but it also was a milestone in the history of Hebrew printing and publishing. To a large extent, its typographic design relied on the *Eshkol* (Cluster) Encyclopedia, only two of whose volumes were published in Berlin in the early 1930s towards the end of the golden age of Hebrew book artistry in Germany. The improvement of this design and its modification to accord with modern international standards for lexicographical literature, at the same time that strict attention was given to print quality, served as a model for other important encyclopedias that appeared in Israel in subsequent years, including Encyclopaedia Biblica.

It is worth noting that Encyclopaedia Hebraica was the product of a private publishing initiative. Members of the Pelli family, who owned *Mesadah* Publishing House, undertook this project without any institutional support whatsoever. Many large and important lexicographical projects that were published in subsequent years in Israel were the result of a private initiative and cooperation between scholars and a commercial publisher who saw not only economic potential in the project but also an important national mission. In this context, one should also mention Avraham Even-Shoshan’s Hebrew dictionary whose first edition was published by *Kiriyat sefer* Publishing House at close to the same time.

**5.1 The Typographic Revolution**

During the State of Israel’s first year of existence, Schocken Publishing House put out the memoirs of its first president Chaim Weizmann. This book constitutes a milestone in the history of Hebrew typography which stood at the threshold of a major breakthrough. This was the first book printed with a new Hebrew font designed by Franziska Baruch in accordance with the instructions and invitation of Salman Schocken. Even though this font was not highly successful and only a few books were printed in it, it created a new attitude to the printed Hebrew letter and charted a course for additional typographers who would soon go on to design new Hebrew fonts.

Despite the meteoric development of Hebrew publishing in the first half of the twentieth century, Hebrew texts continued to be printed in a highly limited assortment of fonts, all of which had been designed and cast in Germany generations ago. Several of them were based on fonts from the early nineteenth century that underwent only a few subsequent changes. In the mid-twentieth century, Hebrew printers had only about ten fonts at their disposal, and most of them were inappropriate for the growing variety of printed materials being produced. Indeed, two new Hebrew fonts, Frank-Rühl and Miriam, had entered widespread use following the conclusion of World War One. Yet, despite efforts various designers made to develop new Hebrew letters, almost no further development in this area occurred after Rafael Frank’s early twentieth century design of Frank-Rühl and Miriam. The few fonts that were designed and cast over the course of the 1920s and the early 1930s were intended for the printing of announcements and posters, and they had almost no effect on Hebrew books’ appearance. Consequently, from the early 1920s until the mid 1950s, the general typographic design of printed Hebrew books and the text found within them remained nearly unchanged and the possibilities for variation and expression in Hebrew books were quite meager. The process of designing and casting new Hebrew print fonts was a very long and complicated process that usually got derailed by difficulties encountered by the large type foundries, first in Germany and later in Britain, Holland, and France, whose owners did not view it as economically advantageous to make large investments to overcome these difficulties.

Hebrew printers, who restricted themselves to the production of religious books, newspapers, and some literary and scholarly works in the early twentieth century, needed to take on many new functions on behalf of a growing community of readers and users, especially after the state’s establishment: advertisements and government forms, lexicons and dictionaries, textbooks in various fields and even telephone books and directories. The limited extent inventory of Hebrew fonts was not sufficient for these various types of publications, and new types of letters were needed that would suit their design. To these new types of publications requiring new fonts, one should add new book genres that had almost never been published in Palestine prior to World War Two: atlases, maps, and music books. In this context, one should acknowledge the activities of *Nagan* (Musician) Press, one of the first private publishers of musical books active in the Land of Israel, which, together with the institutional book publishers of the workers’ parties, printed song books and sheet music. First and foremost, *Nagan* (Musician) Press’s diverse activity came about due to development of musical life in Israel.

In 1951, Dr. Moshe Spitzer opened a type foundry together with Heinrich von Kleif, an English metal dealer, who invested the money necessary for its establishment. It was the only type foundry that ever operated in the Land of Israel. Even though it was only active for a decade, its influence on Hebrew books and Hebrew typography was tremendous; its letters can be seen up until today. At the same time that he was casting the few Hebrew fonts that were in wide use in Israeli printing houses, Spitzer designed a new Hebrew font together with Tzvi Hausman that was cast for the first time in 1956. Simultaneously, Spitzer continued to put out quality books through his publishing house *Tarshish* that served as a model for publishing enterprises that got underway at the time. Spitzer collaborated with additional active designers and typographers who changed Hebrew books’ appearance at the end of the 1950s.

Between 1954 and 1960, five new Hebrew print fonts designed by a small unified group of typographers and graphic designers appeared. Ismar David (1910-1996), Eliyahu Koren (1907-2001), Henri Friedlaender (1904-1996), and Zvi Narkis (1921-2010) drew on in-depth study of the history of the Hebrew letter and wide knowledge of modern typography and printing to create new fonts whose use spread with tremendous rapidity.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even though each of these designers worked independently, they all operated in a highly circumscribed space in Jerusalem, possessed similar backgrounds (except for Narkis, all of them were born into German-Jewish households), and knew each other well. These new fonts opened a new chapter in the history of Hebrew printing and typography. Hebrew typography became more flexible and became more like other typographies that were open to developments, changes and fashions. In the coming years, more and more new Hebrew fonts appeared with increasing frequency. New designers, such as Asher Oron, ‘Amram Perat, Ada Yardeni, and Shmuel Sela joined the established designers mentioned above to enrich the assortment of fonts at Hebrew printers’ disposal. The fonts that they designed, starting in the second half of the 1960s, were already suited to changes in print technology, especially photosetting. As a result, emphasis was placed on matching them with various foreign language fonts.

**6. The 1960s and Beyond: New Technologies, Passing Fashions**

The great momentum that arose in the Israeli publishing industry starting in the 1960s and the changes in the external appearance of Hebrew books published thereafter are connected to a wide gamut of economic and cultural factors. Nonetheless, the ongoing influence of certain factors is visible from the beginnings of Hebrew publishing in the early twentieth century to the State of Israel’s second decade. Across this span of impressive development, certain routine elements had a decisive influence: the development of the Hebrew language; Hebrew culture and literature; the stratification of civil society in the Land of Israel; the economic development of the Land of Israel. Israel’s establishment as a sovereign state where educational, scientific, and higher educational institutions, government ministries, internationally recognized religious institutions, and a growing reading audience thirsty for belles lettres exist turned the local printing industry into one of the state’s principle economic fields. Thus, while in 1958, towards the end of the state’s first decade of existence, only 216 printing houses operated in Israel, only seven years later, in 1965, there were 533. Subsequently, this number continued to increase.

The publishing industry’s development led to the introduction of new technologies, including, first and foremost, offset printing. Gradually, lead disappeared from the printing house and advanced systems of printing that were more flexible and enabled freer design took the place of relief printing. The range of colors used on book covers expanded, and the integration of colored illustrations into books, principally children’s and scholarly books, was no longer a phenomenon worthy of mention. Simultaneously, the quality of paper and print dyes improved, and the price of these important raw materials decreased, thanks, in part, to the establishment of Israeli factories that supplied the Israeli printing industry. Many Hebrew books printed in Israel possessed a comparable print quality to books produced in Western European and North American countries; several of the large Israeli offset printing factories even performed jobs for large foreign companies and turned the printing field into one of the state’s export fields. The transition from metal typesetting to phototypesetting and digital typesetting simplified and decreased the cost of introducing new types of letters to the typesetting world. The inexpensive dry transfer lettering system popularized by the British Letraset company made possible lab-like experimental conditions for development of new types of letters that gradually became widespread in various permutations. Consequently, many Israeli book designers and graphic artists no longer needed to rely on calligraphy and built-up letter design and could use preprepared letters that were suitable for a wide range of purposes. Photographs and preprepared print letters took the place of line drawings and stylized letters that had been drawn by hand on the spines of Israeli books.

While Russian-born publishers and artists influenced the external appearance of Hebrew books during the first third of the twentieth century, hegemony in this area moved into the hands of German and Central European-born artists during the second third of the twentieth century, and, in the final third of the twentieth century, Hebrew book design came under the influence of British and American book design trends. These developments find poignant expression in the changing character of Bezalel, Israel central and most important art school. In the late 1960s, teachers who had been trained in London began teaching at Bezalel. Under their influence, emphasis in the Practical Graphic Arts Department shifted from calligraphy to typography. The matching of printed Hebrew letters to existing foreign letters and development of predesigned solutions to changing graphic needs replaced earlier exploratory and improvisational efforts that drew on traditional writing techniques and elements found in ancient manuscripts. Typography was a significant element in the transition from a “Practical Graphic Arts” department to a “Graphic Design” department and the name change was not just a semantic matter but also an expression of a fundamental change in approach. The graphic designer no longer needed to educate the developing nation or create a national art. Instead, he/she needed to solve problems of communication with a defined target audience. Through attempts at more demonstrative and personal expression in their design work undertaken while studying with some of Bezalel’s most progressive teachers, designers obtained the balance necessary for this radical shift.

Over the course of the twentieth century not just the content, but the external appearance of Hebrew books produced in the Land of Israel changed tremendously. In many ways, the tremendous change that occurred in Hebrew typography reflects the growth and development of modern secular Hebrew culture. Only a hundred years passed from when the first secular Hebrew printing houses opened in Jaffa and Tel Aviv, equipped with primitive machines, a meager inventory of type, and substandard paper, to a time when every Israeli printing house possesses sophisticated digital equipment and has hundreds of Hebrew fonts and every shade and weight of paper at its disposal. In those hundred years, Israel became the sole world center for the production of Hebrew books of a high technical and artistic quality in a quantity and a variety unprecedented in the history of the Jewish people, the People of the Book.

1. In contrast, one should note that about 340 Jewish residents of Jerusalem supported themselves through collection of alms in 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Only 48 books were published in the Land of Israel in 1920. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a more expansive survey of Hebrew publishing in Germany in the first half of the 1920s, see: [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hebrew publishing developed in the United States at the same time intensive publishing activities were taking place in Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Koren Tanakh designed by Eliyahu Koren and first published in 1958 became an important milestone in the history of the Hebrew book and is particularly noteworthy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)