

# And Israel's founding father is ... Eliezer Ben Yehuda

It's high time to start thinking differently about the man who was able to revive the Hebrew language

Aluf Benn

Who deserves the title of Israel's founding father? In recent years, the answer has seemed clear: Theodor Herzl, author of "The Jewish State" and founder of the Zionist movement, whose picture hangs in the Knesset.

Israel's foreign policy is a continuation of the diplomatic Zionism that Herzl conceived, which relied on the Western powers establishing and maintaining a Jewish state in a region whose inhabitants were mostly Muslim Arabs. The institutions of the state are engaged in preserving his memory, and specifically in preserving and bolstering his image as "the visionary behind the state."

New biographies keep being written about him, and essays are published contrasting Herzl's utopian vision with the Israeli reality, exploring his economic policies and his attitude toward minorities. He is presented as a role model above politics and wars, someone who aspired to the highest ideals, someone whose vision – had we realized it in full – would have resulted in us being in a much better situation.

There's no doubt Herzl correctly identified the dangers of antisemitism in Europe, and demonstrated a rare and brilliant combination of vision and action, ideological clarity and political insight. But this embrace obscures the fact that Herzl visited this land only once, didn't know Hebrew and felt most at home in European lounges, not the bright sunlight of the Middle East.

Like many others of his generation, he misunderstood the power of religion and its ability to resurrect itself even in the face of philosophical, scientific and technological innovation. His thought was tainted by colonialism and Orientalism. That was the spirit of the times in which he lived and is accepted even today by most Jewish Israelis, who see themselves as the representatives of Western progress in the region and their Arab and Muslim neighbors as primitives. It's easy for



Ben Yehuda Eran Wolkowski

them to identify with the journalist who was born in Budapest, worked in Vienna, wrote in German and laid the foundations for the "villa in the jungle," as former Prime Minister Ehud Barak once called Israel.

But beloved as Herzl's ideas are to both liberal and religious-Zionist Jews in Israel, they are equally and inherently objectionable to the ultra-Orthodox, whose spiritual forefathers rejected Zionism from its inception – and even more so to the Palestinians, who paid dearly, and are still paying the price, for turning "The Jewish State" into reality.

That is why only a shrinking proportion of Israelis can identify with or feel affection for Herzl. Arab lawmakers swear allegiance to the state in the shadow of his portrait, but they don't accept his ideas as right, even if, like MK Mansour Abbas, they acknowledge the success of those ideas in practice.

## The Ben-Gurion cult

The second candidate for the title of founding father is Israel's first prime minister and defense minister, David Ben-Gurion, who led the pre-state Jewish community during the years prior to Israel's establishment, read the Declaration of Independence, set up and shaped the Israel Defense Forces, developed Israel's nuclear power and devised the country's system of governance – both political (the lack of a constitution; unstable coalition governments; a technocratic civil service) and social (the religious status quo; the existence of separate secular, religious, Arab and Haredi

school systems; the socialist economy).

Like Herzl, Ben-Gurion has benefited from an effort by state institutions to perpetuate his memory and prestige. Israel's main gateway, Ben-Gurion International Airport, is named for him, and all prime ministers show up once a year for a memorial ceremony at his grave in Sde Boker and promise to complete his vision.

The peak years of the Ben-Gurion cult were the three decades after his death in 1973, when his image as an active and controversial politician became blurred and he was seen as a beloved and slightly eccentric grandfather. That is when historians Michael Bar-Zohar and Shabtai Tevet (who never completed his work) wrote comprehensive biographies that portrayed Ben-Gurion as an exalted leader, farseeing, and blessed with rare political and executive abilities. Even the 1993 Oslo Accords and the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip – which were the respective work of his protégés Shimon Peres and Ariel Sharon – were portrayed as the fulfillment of Ben-Gurion's support for dividing the land.

But in recent years, the "old man" has lost his luster and his image has suffered a mortal blow. Likud, founded by his political rival Menachem Begin, came to power and became the dominant party, at the expense of Ben-Gurion's Mapai, whose current incarnation (Labor) is

teetering on the verge of extinction. The rising powers in Israeli society – Mizrahi Jews, the ultra-Orthodox and the Arabs – see Ben-Gurion as a demonic figure, not a herald of redemption.

They see him as the leader behind a patronizing, racist and oppressive policy of absorbing Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, whom he described more than once as inferior; as an atheist who sought "to take children away from religion" and force a secular lifestyle on their parents. And of course, as the person chiefly responsible for the Nakba – the flight or expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Israel, the confiscation of millions of dunams of Palestinian-owned land, the construction of cities and villages for Jews on the ruins of Palestinian communities, and the imposition of a military government on the remaining Arabs. A modern biography of Ben-Gurion, written by Tom Segev, places the idea of "transferring" the Arabs and its implementation at the heart of the protagonist's ideology and legacy.

The other elements of Ben-Gurion's legacy also haven't withstood the test of time. The nationalized economy and organized labor were dismantled under Likud. They have been replaced with veneration of American capitalism as the way to achieve self-actualization and economic growth, as reflected by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his heirs, Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid.

The army has lost its role as the national melting pot and become a vehicle for implementing the occupation of the territories, widening economic and social disparities, and granting indulgent benefits to senior officers. This process will only intensify as growing numbers of young Israelis (the Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox, who currently constitute around half of all elementary school students) aren't drafted at all into what was once called "the people's army."

## New native culture

The focus on Ben-Gurion and Herzl has pushed their most important rival for the

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Eliezer Ben Yehuda's work room, preserved at the Academy of the Hebrew Language at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Tomer Appelbaum

title of Israel's founding father, Eliezer Ben Yehuda, out of the public conversation. "The reviver of the Hebrew language" and his partners in this endeavor – the founders of the Hebrew school system during the first waves of pre-state Jewish immigration – fomented an unprecedented cultural revolution that has no parallel.

They created a new native culture on the basis of an ancient literary language and turned it into a living, spoken and developing language. They rebelled against the Yiddish of the shtetl, from which most of the Zionist immigrants came, and also against Ladino, which was spoken by Sephardi Jews; Arabic, which was the local language; and Turkish, which was spoken by the land's rulers at that time.

Hebrew connected the new society of which Herzl dreamed to the landscapes, history and heritage of the Bible and to archaeological discoveries in the area. And in time, it also built a linguistic separation barrier between Israeli Jews and Jews living overseas – a secret language that enables Israeli tourists in Mykonos, Phuket, Dubai and Manhattan to gossip about the locals without being understood.

Ben Yehuda was a revolutionary who fought from a minority position and defeated his opponents. These included religious Jews, who viewed Hebrew as a holy tongue that must not be used to discuss day-to-day affairs, as well as the Jews who wanted to found local universities that would teach in European languages.

The connection between the lone lexicographer from Jerusalem, educators in the new Jewish settlements and the founders of Tel Aviv, "the first Hebrew city," laid the groundwork for Ben Yehuda's most important political achievement: influencing the British Mandatory government that ruled the area in the three decades prior to Israel's establishment to recognize Hebrew as one of the land's official languages. During the pre-state era, parents who had been raised on Yiddish at home raised their children in Hebrew, and the public conversation took place in the revived language.

The battle against the British toward the end of the Mandate era was waged under the slogan "a Hebrew state." And when that state was established, it forced both new Jewish immigrants and the Arabs who lived there to study and earn a living in Hebrew. The pockets of resistance to Israeli Hebrew, mainly in the ultra-Orthodox community, gradually shrunk.

Hebrew was and remains the most important and successful vehicle for creating an Israeli identity that can unite both Jews and Arabs, both religious Jews and secular ones. Not Herzl's Jewish state, not Ben-Gurion's army or Nakba, but the language Ben Yehuda revived.

One could argue, rightly, that the dominance of Hebrew puts Arabs in a position of inherent inferiority, since they are forced to study and work in their second language rather than their mother tongue. But what bet-

ter way is there to integrate and involve a minority community in a country where the majority speaks Hebrew?

The separation between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza – and to a large extent in East Jerusalem as well – is built on a language barrier no less than on physical ones. During the early years of the occupation, when masses of Palestinians from the territories worked in Israel, they learned Hebrew at their jobs (and in Israeli prisons). The intifadas represented a linguistic revolt as much as a desire to end the occupation. Hebrew has disappeared from Gaza, Ramallah and Nablus.

Ben Yehuda's public image rests mainly on a 1967 children's book by Dvora Omer, "Rebirth: The Story of Eliezer Ben Yehuda and the Modern Hebrew Language," which described how he forced his son to be the first Hebrew child and consequently to suffer distress and social isolation. (I remember quite well how, at age 8, I burst into tears in my parents' bedroom as they were getting dressed to go out after reading her description of the Ben Yehuda family's poverty and illness.) And of course, on the eponymous song by Yaron London and Matti Caspi that portrayed the reviver of the Hebrew language as an odd duck focused obsessively on his goal.

In recent years, he has been criticized as an abusive father. It also turns out that, despite his loyalty to Hebrew, he exploited his connections to enable his son to study in Paris, in French.

Ben Yehuda didn't have Herzl's beard or Ben-Gurion's mane – traits that transformed them into pop icons. Major streets in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv bear his name, but his legacy was entrusted to the Academy of the Hebrew Language, whose activities are limited to its own professional field.

In 2012, Benjamin Netanyahu's government decided to create a national memorial day for Ben Yehuda on the 21st of the Hebrew month of Tevet (which is his birthday according to the Jewish calendar). This day was dubbed "Hebrew Language Day." Activities were supposed to take place in the school system and the IDF, alongside activities to encourage Hebrew in the Diaspora in cooperation with the World Zionist Organization.

Unsurprisingly, Netanyahu didn't think about bolstering Hebrew among Israel's non-Jews as a vital tool to encourage Israeli identity. Instead, he chose institutions that Arabs consider unacceptable and which engage in discrimination against them.

It's high time to think differently about Ben Yehuda. Despite his flaws as a parent, he deserves recognition as the progenitor of Israeliness – the man who created a common denominator for Israeli society in all its diversity and tribes.

December 16 will mark the 100th anniversary of Ben Yehuda's death. This provides a good opportunity to return him to the public conversation and award him the place he deserves – no less, and perhaps even more, than Herzl and Ben-Gurion do.