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Tal Hever-Chybowski is the director of the Paris Yiddish Center – Medem Library, the largest center for Yiddish language and literature in Europe. His native language, however, is Hebrew, which is the focus of journal he has founded, Mikan Ve'eylakh ("From Now On/From Here On"). The journal's novelty rests in its treatment of Hebrew not as the exclusive property of the State of Israel, but as a Diasporic language in its own right. Mikan Ve'eylakh's two issues feature articles, short stories and poems by Hebrew writers living in the Diaspora. Macha Fogel, K.'s Yiddishland correspondent, recently met up with Hever-Chybowski to discuss his project.

By [Macha Fogel / Tal Hever-Chybowski](#)

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Tal Hever-Chybowski, the director of the Paris House of Yiddish Culture - Medem Library

Macha Fogel: When did you become interested in this amazing subject, “Diasporic Hebrew”?

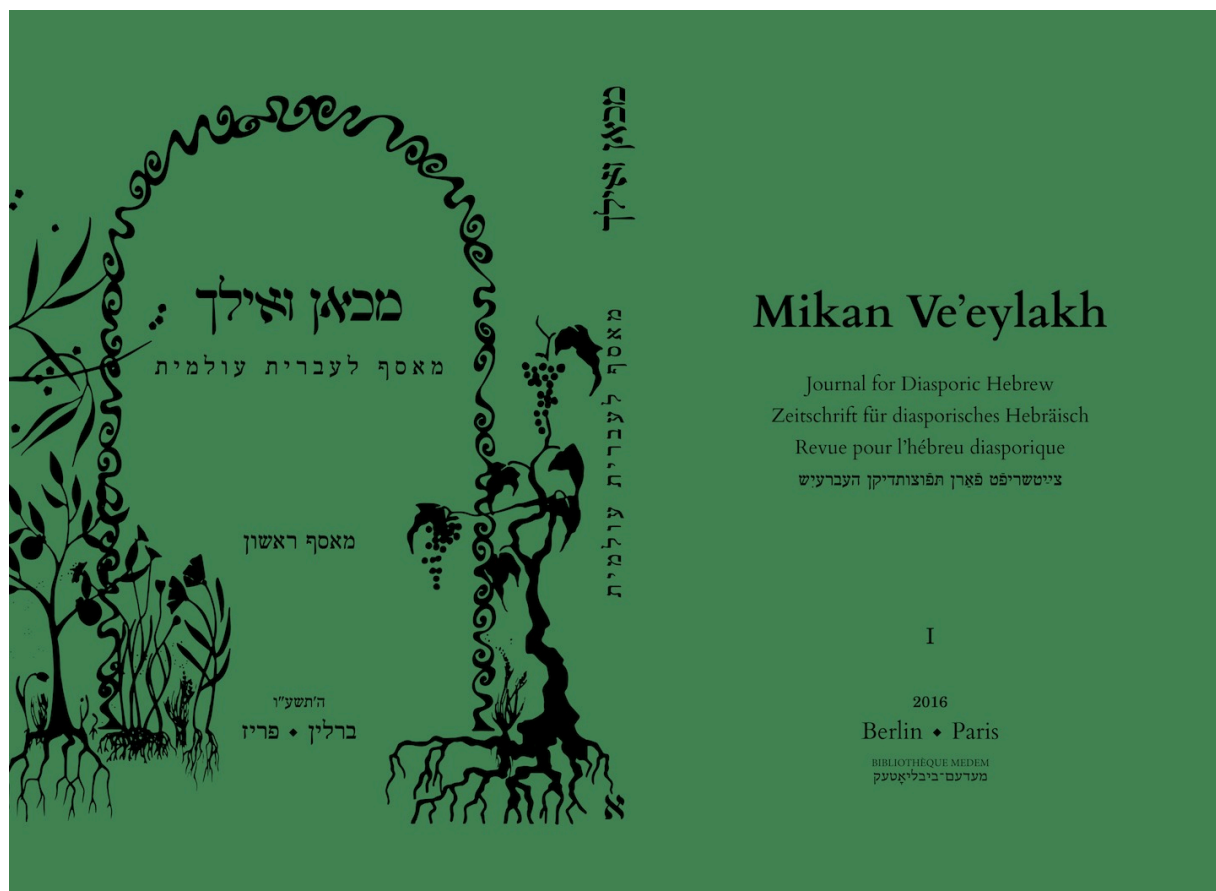
Tal Hever-Chybowski: When I immigrated to Berlin in 2008 from the State of Israel, I wondered what to do with my language. Hebrew was my mother tongue, the language of my dreams, of my innermost thoughts. I could not abandon it, even though I had left Jerusalem. It was while reflecting on this very personal question that I realized that Hebrew could not only play a role today outside the borders of the State of Israel, but had already played a large role in Europe for hundreds of years. My Israeli upbringing had hidden from me the role of Europe in the modernity of Hebrew.

M. F.: Before going any further, why did you leave Israel, and why did you choose to emigrate to Berlin?

T. H-C: I wanted to leave the State of Israel because it is a country at war and I didn't know how I could live in a country at war, how I could responsibly start a family in a war zone. At first, I thought of emigrating to the United States. I ended up in Germany, by chance. I had learned German at university and had German friends in Jerusalem, where I studied history at the Hebrew University. In 2007, I went to Berlin for two months to study German. I saw that it was a comfortable city, that I could live there. Other less conscious reasons also motivated me naturally. This place is linked to National Socialism, to the Genocide of Europe's Jews. In the society where I grew up, it was a forbidden place, where one could not go. I was sure I would not meet my uncles there! It was a real break. Finally, at a deeper level, the Second World War marked a Jewish defeat. What to do with this terrible defeat? How to repair what cannot be repaired? A Jewish cultural and linguistic presence in Berlin, where I am at this very moment, indicates that one does not accept the assassination of European Judaism.

M. F.: Isn't there a strong spirit of contradiction in your individual life choices in relation to the course of history?

T. H-C.: It's true. But in this negation, there is also the force of affirmation. In the very left-wing circles of Israeli society where I grew up, there is a tendency to say "no," to systematically oppose everything, but without constructing a positive alternative. As far as I am concerned, it is not a matter of being a contrarian or a provocator, but of trying to make a positive choice here in Europe. Where I grew up, Yiddish was suppressed. In learning it, in seeking it out, I didn't just say "no" to who I was. I went in search of what I positively was and what had been hidden from me. You have to deconstruct, but also to reconstruct.



Cover of the first issue of *Mikan Ve'eylakh*

M.F.: Why did you start the journal *Mikan Ve'eylakh*, which could be translated as “From Here On” or “From Now On”?

T. H-C: The journal was born out of seven years of reflection and research, between 2009 and 2016. During this time I met with partners: writer, and academics. The two issues of the journal, published in 2016 and 2017, were conceived as two manifestos; it is not a periodical. A third issue may prove necessary, we shall see.

In the first edition, we wanted to spark debate, to show how important it is to fight the myth of Hebrew as a dead and resurrected language, according to the commonly-used biological metaphor. The subtitle of the journal, “*me’asefle’ivrit ‘olamit*”: a journal for an “eternal” or “global” Hebrew, means that the concept of Diaspora is not only about people, but also about languages.

In the second issue, we asked ourselves how to define this diasporic model from a philosophical point of view. Diaspora designates a

discontinuous existence: it is made of ruptures, both geographical and temporal. These breaks that run through it are necessary for its model.

To be more concrete: many people ask me how our children could learn Hebrew in a diasporic situation. What about our grandchildren? How can we ensure the continuity of this language amid the dangers of assimilation? The journal's answer is that the linguistic history of Judaism is made up of these gaps; sometimes we forget. It is then necessary to re-join the chain. The diasporic image of a chain of transmission made up of links presupposes spaces, discontinuities, the possibility of untying oneself and finding the link again. It is opposed to the nationalist model, whose biological metaphor postulates that a culture is dead if it does not pass from mother to child. This is a question that you know well, Macha, in relation to the transmission of Yiddish...

M. F.: I notice a correspondence between your personal choices and your general vision of Jewish linguistic history. What do you think about this?

T. H-C.: Indeed. Yiddish had been spoken by my ancestors, up to my grandparents. Only my parents did not speak it. And I learned it. The language skipped a generation. It could skip five! It is very important to think that culture can be created not in fear, but in confidence. The son of the great Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz did not speak Yiddish, but Polish. The grandson of the Jewish thinker Moses Mendelsohn was a convert. Yet the writings of these authors have remained, because Jewish time is diasporic.



Tal Hever-Chybowski reading an excerpt from *Mikan Ve'eylakh* at the magazine's launch evening at the Medem Library in Paris, 2016.

M. F.: What about the polemical charge carried by this idea of Hebrew as a diasporic Jewish language among others? Do you intend to revive the “War of the Languages?”

T. H-C.: Certainly not. When we talk about the “War of the Languages”, we think of the dispute between Yiddish and Hebrew during the period of the Yishuv, the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine. Which language to choose? When the writer Mendele Moykher Sforim, one of the founders of both modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, was asked this question, he replied that it was like asking him which nostril

he preferred to breathe through. The great literary critic Bal-Makhshoves said that Jewish literature was bilingual, that the two languages were used for a single literature. It is this approach that interests me. Moreover, the Hebrew journal *Mikan Ve'eylakh* is published by the Medem Library; diasporic Hebrew finds a home under the wings of Yiddish...

To those who would accuse me of wanting to create animosity toward Israeli Hebrew, I would also reply that it is not about that, but about perceiving Israeli Hebrew as a particular component of the general historical corpus of Hebrew. The philosopher and translator Franz Rosenzweig noted in the 1920s that even the newborns of the Jewish settlements in Palestine could not help but speak an eternal language, comprising all the accumulated layers of its history. Hebrew is a treasure trove with many components, and Israeli Hebrew is one of them. Not being a messianist, I do not believe that the State of Israel will last forever. No political system is eternal, not even France... What is not ephemeral, however, is literature. The Jewish literary corpus defies rupture. Israeli production is part of this corpus.

M. F.: You oppose the organic metaphor of Hebrew as a language that is dead and then resurrected. Wasn't the role of Ahad Ha'am and Ben-Yehuda decisive in reviving the language?

T. H-C.: Yes, of course, but no more so than Rashi, Rambam or Mendele Moykher Sforim. Ben Yehuda went to Jerusalem saying that he wanted to hear the Hebrew that was spoken in the streets there – because it was already spoken. He did not resurrect a dead language. This thought is foreign to Judaism. Hebrew was never perceived by Jews as a dead language, like Latin or Greek, which were considered as such after the Middle Ages, when the European Renaissance had to find answers to its morbid problems. This obsession with the dead and the living is false and dangerous. The Nazis exterminated the Jews because they felt that historically, Jews did not deserve to be a living people. In his pamphlet

Autoemancipation, Leon Pinsker, a pioneering Zionist activist in Russia in the 1880s, explains antisemitism as the fear of the living dead (Jews being seen, so to speak, as Zombies, because they lost their historical homeland). One is afraid of the living dead, so one can kill them.

Zionism is an ideology that has many sides. However, in order to assert itself as the Renaissance of Judaism, it had to name what was dead: the “Old Jew.” This is an act of intergenerational and historical violence that is perhaps understandable, but still very violent. [At this point in the interview, Tal Hever-Chybowski breaks off to address his mother in Hebrew].

In fact, every great historical and intellectual movement has caused a shift. In the Middle Ages, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, between Spain and Provence, Arabic gave Hebrew its philosophical vocabulary. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Haskala*, the Jewish Enlightenment, provided Hebrew with new tools that it needed. The latest Hebrew neologisms are not only a Palestinian or an Israeli phenomenon. They were also invented in Warsaw and Odessa, where a daily press was printed in Hebrew, where circles of Hebraists met and had to put a coin in a piggy bank every time somebody used Yiddish instead of Hebrew.

M. F.: In the last case you mention, that of the Eastern European Hebraists seeking to develop Hebrew, was it not a question of creating a new language for a future nation-state, for a future baby, as it were?

T. H.-C.: Today, we may think that these Hebraists were aiming at the creation of a national state; but this is an anachronistic reasoning. All sorts of desires co-existed in these circles. Of course, there is a correlation between Hebraism and the movements of the Jewish settlements that had left Russia since the end of the 19th century. But among the Zionists there were many Yiddishists, who thought that Yiddish should be the language of this new national home.

Other Zionists did not think that this home should take the form of a state. Mendele Moykher Sforim, the Goethe of Hebrew literature, thought Zionism was a ridiculous idea; indeed, many Hebraists did not take it seriously. We cannot judge the past by what we know today, and we cannot reduce this Hebrew culture to the desire to create a state. It is our duty to be nuanced, to know the past instead of denying it.

The two issues of the *Mikan Ve'eylakh* journal

M. F.: Does your reflection contain a political message toward the State of Israel today?

T. H-C.: The State of Israel as an object of controversy does not interest *Mikan Ve'eylakh*. What interests us is the question of the Hebrew language. However, it does become political when I say, and this will be of interest to *K.*, that Hebrew has its place here, in a Europe that must accept it and give it the possibility of existing on its soil. We speak of Yiddish as a language that has been murdered in Europe, but this is also the case for Hebrew. Today, if we do not act, we forfeit Hebrew to the State of Israel.

M. F.: Do you want to take Hebrew away from the State of Israel?

T. H-C: No, I do not want to tear Hebrew away from the State of Israel. On the contrary, accepting that a country can have several languages and that a language can exist in several countries strengthens those who use it.

M. F.: In Europe, the idea of a refuge for Jews in the State of Israel is often perceived as necessary for the serenity of diaspora communities. Would you understand that some might fear that your reflection on Hebrew as a diasporic language would undermine the legitimacy of the existence of this state?

T. H-C: I would understand these fears if *Mikan Ve'eylakh* were published in the language of a dominant European culture, such as English, German, French... But the magazine is written in Hebrew. It is not my intention to create animosity toward Israeli Hebrew, this is an internal, particularistic, not universalist discussion. The issue is not to enlighten the world about Hebrew.

On the other hand, I understand very well the fears that one can have as a European Jew, even though I was raised in a country where Jews are the majority. The question "Is this good for the Jews?" that you ask me is relevant. However, I find it toxic as a reflex. The idea that the survival of

the Jewish people can only be assured in a certain geopolitical setup is very reductive and makes Judaism too dependent on international affairs. It is a dangerous shortcut in the mind. Wouldn't we have the right, like our ancestors, to create a Jewish culture, literature, cinema... in Europe?

M. F.: But isn't this attempt to establish or re-establish a Hebrew culture in Europe a bit "forced"?

T. H-C: Ah, of course it is. It is completely "forced." Christian missionaries have been criticizing Jews for a very long time for their stubbornness in renouncing Jesus Christ; they also find it "forced."

You see, I don't think that our thinking in any way weakens Judaism, which has survived for millennia because of its culture, its faith, its writings, its religious and linguistic practices. We must not forget that Jews are the people of the Book; to ensure the continuity of this people, what matters is the book.

Tal Hever-Chybowski is director of the 'Maison de la culture yiddish – Bibliothèque Medem' in Paris, where he teaches Yiddish literature. He is editor-in-chief of 'Mikan Ve'eylakh': Journal for Diasporic Hebrew (Berlin and Paris). In 2017, he founded 'Yiddish in Berlin: Summer University for Yiddish Language and Literature', at the Institute for Eastern Europe of the Free University of Berlin. Recently, he directed the Yiddish play 'Jacob Jacobson' at the Théâtre de l'Opprimé in Paris. He is currently working on a PhD in history at the University of Göttingen.



Macha Fogel / Tal Hever-Chybowski

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