On Our Language: A Confession
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Gershom Scholem

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The following text was found in March 1985 among the papers of Gershom Scholem. I am grateful to Mrs. Fania Scholem for transmitting it to me – Stéphane Mosès.

For Franz Rosenzweig. On the occasion of 26 December 1926

This country is a volcano, and language is lodged within it. People here talk of many things that may lead to our ruin, and more than ever of the Arabs. But there is another danger, much more uncanny than the Arab nation, and it is a necessary result of the Zionist enterprise: what of the “actualization” of the Hebrew language? That sacred language on which we nurture our children, is it not an abyss that must open up one day? The people certainly don’t know what they are doing. They think they have secularized the Hebrew language, have done away with its apocalyptic point. But that, of course, is not true: the secularization of the language is no more than a manner of speaking, a ready-made expression. It is impossible to empty the words so bursting with meaning, unless one sacrifices the language itself. The phantasmagoric Volapük spoken in our streets precisely defines the expressionless linguistic space which alone has permitted the “secularization” of language. But if we transmit the language to our children as it was transmitted to us, if we, a generation of transition, revive the language of the ancient books for them, that it may reveal itself anew through them, shall not the religious power of that language explode one day? And when that explosion occurs, what kind of a generation will experience it? As for us, we live within that language above an abyss, most of us with the steadiness of blind men. But when we regain our sight, we or our descendants, shall we not fall
into that abyss? And we cannot know if the sacrifice of those who will perish in that fall will be enough to close it again.

The initiators of the Hebrew language renaissance believed blindly, almost fanatically, in the miraculous power of language, and that was their good fortune. Because if they had been clairvoyant, they never would have had the demonic courage to resuscitate a language destined to become an Esperanto. Even today, they continue to walk along, enchanted, above an abyss from which no sound rises; and they pass on the ancient names and signs to our youth. As for us, we are seized with fear when, amidst the thoughdess discourse of a speaker, a religious term suddenly makes us shudder, though it may even have been meant to console. This Hebrew is heavy with impending catastrophe. It cannot and will not remain in its present state: our children have no other language left, and it is truly they alone who will pay the price for that meeting we have arranged for them, without ever having asked them, without asking even ourselves. The day will come when the language will turn against those who speak it. There are already moments in our own life when this happens, unforgettable, stigmatizing moments, when all the presumptuousness of our enterprise is suddenly revealed. When that day comes, will there be a young generation able to withstand the revolt of a sacred tongue?

Language is name. The power of language is enclosed in the name; the abyss of language is sealed within it. Now that we have invoked the ancient names day after day, we can no longer hold off the forces they contain. Once awakened, they will appear, for we have summoned them with terrible violence. Indeed, we speak a vestigial, ghostly language. The names haunt our phrases; writers and journalists play with them, pretending to believe or to make God believe that all this is really not important. And yet, out of the spectral degradation of our language, the force of the holy often speaks to us. For the names have a life of their own; if they did not, woe to our children, who would be abandoned, hopeless, to an empty future.

Hebrew words, all that are not neologisms but have been taken from the treasure-house of our "good old language,"
are full to bursting with meaning. A generation that takes over
the most fruitful part of our tradition – its language – cannot,
though it may ardently wish to, live without tradition. When
the day finally comes and the force shored up in the Hebrew
language is unleashed, when the “spoken,” the content of
language, takes form once again, our people will find itself
confronted anew with that sacred tradition, signifying the
choice before them: either to submit or to perish. Because at
the heart of such a language, in which we ceaselessly evoke
God in a thousand ways, thus calling Him back into the reality
of our life, He cannot keep silent. This inevitable revolution
of language, in which the Voice will again become audible, is
the only subject never discussed in this country. Because those
who endeavor to revive the Hebrew language did not truly
believe in the Judgement to which their acts are summoning
us. May the levity that has accompanied us on this apocalyptic
path not lead us to our destruction.

Jerusalem, 7 Tevet 5687

Translated from the German by Ora Wiskind