

TANGLED ROOTS

BJ'S

Program in Judaic Studies
Brown University
Box 1826
Providence, RI 02912

BROWN JUDAIC STUDIES

Edited by

Mary Gluck
David C. Jacobson
Saul M. Olyan
Rachel Rojanski
Michael L. Satlow
Adam Teller

Number 365
TANGLED ROOTS

by
Israel Bartal

TANGLED ROOTS

THE EMERGENCE OF ISRAELI CULTURE

Israel Bartal

BJS

Brown Judaic Studies
Providence, Rhode Island

© 2020 Brown University. All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by means of any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed in writing to the Rights and Permissions Office, Program in Judaic Studies, Brown University, Box 1826, Providence, RI 02912, USA.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barṭal, Yíśra'el, author.

Title: Tangled roots : the emergence of Israeli culture / Israel Bartal.

Other titles: Brown Judaic studies ; no. 365.

Description: Providence, Rhode Island : Brown University, 2020. | Series: Brown Judaic studies; 365 | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "In this new book Israel Bartal traces the history of modern Hebrew culture prior to the emergence of political Zionism. Bartal examines how traditional and modernist ideals and Western and non-European cultures merged in an unprecedented encounter between an ancient land (Israel) and a multigenerational people (the Jews). As this new Hebrew culture was taking shape, the memory of the recent European past played a highly influential role in shaping the image of the New Hebrew, that mythological hero who was meant to supplant the East European exilic Jew"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019059353 (print) | LCCN 2019059354 (ebook) | ISBN 9781951498726 (paperback) | ISBN 9781951498733 (hardback) | ISBN 9781951498740 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Jews--Civilization. | Israel--Civilization. | Palestine--Civilization.

Classification: LCC DS112 .B3158 2020 (print) | LCC DS112 (ebook) | DDC 956.94--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019059353>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019059354>

Printed on acid-free paper.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: A Culture in the Making	1
1 • Pre-Zionist Multiculturalism: Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and Other Jews in Ottoman Jerusalem	9
2 • The New Zionist Road Map: From Old Gravesites to New Settlements	23
3 • Imperial Identities: Nationalism, Politics, and Culture	35
4 • Upstairs, Downstairs: Yiddish and <i>Ivrit</i> in Tel Aviv	49
5 • Revolution and Nostalgia: The Changing Images of the <i>Shtetl</i>	61
6 • Lubavitch, Berlin, and Kinneret: From the “Science of Judaism” to the “Science of Zionism”	75
7 • From St. Petersburg to Zion: The Discovery of Jewish National Music	91
Conclusion	101
Index	105

BJ'S

Acknowledgments

The chapters of this book draw upon both research and experience. For over half a century I have sought to crack the code of Israeli culture using the tools of the critical historian. But, unlike those of my colleagues who examine distant periods and faraway lands, I study the very culture into which I was born. I experienced this culture's transformations and even took part in shaping it. My parents immigrated to Palestine during the British Mandate from a small town in western Ukraine (then under Polish rule). My mother tongue was Yiddish. The children in the house across the street in our small town near Tel Aviv spoke Polish, Iraqi Arabic, Ladino, and Hungarian. Hebrew was the language of our schooling. I grew up in the heart of the Israeli "melting pot" and, before long, became committed to studying the processes that birthed it. Thanks are due to many individuals whose thinking and scholarship contributed to this book in its present form. Some of my teachers at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem at a time when "Israel Studies" was still considered a kind of "journalism," opened my mind to new understandings of the decisive influence of diasporic Jewish cultures in forging the new culture of the Land of Israel. Jacob Katz, Shmuel Ettinger, and Chone Shmeruk, among the greatest lights of Jewish Studies, raised doubts and posed questions. This book is dedicated to their memory.

Numerous colleagues and partnerships in the study of modern Jewish history have also engaged me in fruitful dialogue over the years, helping shape my interpretation of the wondrous cultural phenomenon that emerged in pre-state Palestine. I mention only two: Prof. Jonathan Frenkel of the Hebrew University and Prof. Yehoshua Kaniel of Bar-Ilan University. Each, in his own way, was a pathbreaker in the historiography of Israeli society.

Adam Teller of Brown University first suggested presenting the story of Israeli culture to the English-language reader from the perspective of a veteran Israeli historian simultaneously taking an active part in the enterprise of Hebrew culture and conducting critical research into its origins. This was after hearing me lecture at a Slavic studies conference several years ago on the eastern European origins of Hanukkah in its Zionist

iteration. In autumn 2013, he invited me to give a series of lectures at Brown, out of which I created this book at Adam's suggestion and under his watchful eye. While transforming the lectures into this book I have enjoyed the support and encouragement of the members of the editorial board of Brown Judaic Studies.

Jeffrey Green and Avery Robinson have taken care to make ancient texts in forgotten tongues accessible to the English reader. They bridged the linguistic and terminological gaps and filled holes in the cultural and historical background. I am also grateful to Maurya Horgan's language editing and Ron Makleff's index preparation and their committed professionalism and willingness to help produce the best book possible.

My grandchildren, Shani, Ayelet, Erez, Naomi, Noga, and Nadav are all children of the twenty-first century. Their forebears came to the Land of Israel from Ukraine, Iraq, and Macedonia, where they spoke Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic, and Ladino, respectively. These boys and girls make up the generation that shall continue the story of the Hebrew culture that developed in the nexus between prophecy, necessity, and spontaneity.

BJS

Introduction: A Culture in the Making

Is there such a thing as Israeli culture? Today, seventy years after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, can we really talk about the development of a common culture for an Israeli nation? Would it perhaps be more accurate to speak of a multicultural society that has emerged in the Promised Land—one in which the divisions are more significant than the unifying factors? To find an answer to these questions, we must look at Israeli society from a historical perspective and examine the reciprocal relations that existed between the various Jewish diasporas and the growing Jewish community in the Land of Israel. We must also understand the nature of the power struggle between the new *recommended culture* that the political establishment wanted to establish in the Yishuv and the “old cultures” that continued to exist willy-nilly.

The positions taken by modern Jewish national movements (including Zionism in all its varieties) on questions of culture were, in fact, no different from those of other national movements that arose in modern eastern and central Europe. The Jewish nationalists, just like the Greeks, the Serbs, the Czechs, and the Ukrainians (all neighbors of the Jews in the multiethnic empires of the nineteenth century), truly believed they were reviving an ancient culture. In their view, the heritage of the past that had existed for centuries in religious forms and had been perpetuated for generations in Jewish ritual, contained the germ of a modern national revival. Hence, the nationalist interpretation of the past was conservative and, at the same time, rebellious. Revolt against the old, while preserving it, might seem impossible to an observer unfamiliar with the dialectic of modern national discourse. For the architects of the new national culture, however, it was a powerful tool for enlisting both conservative and innovative supporters.

This duality was, in reality, a direct extension of the Haskalah movement: it was quite common for the same Haskalah thinker, novelist, poet, or historian to become a mouthpiece for nationalist ideas! Decades before the advent of Jewish nationalism, Haskalah had offered the Jews a mixture

of Western Enlightenment thought with a closeness to traditional texts that gave rise to an innovative reading of traditional writings. And, as with *Haskalah*, so with nationalism.¹

In time, this form of innovative reading itself became an almost sacred tradition. This was certainly the case with the Bible, which the Maskilim in central and eastern Europe regarded as the fundamental text of the renewed Jewish culture rather than the Talmud. This “return” of enlightened European Jewry to the Bible, which took place specifically in the eighteenth century, is unquestionably a result of Protestant Christian influences. Things did not stop there, however. At the end of the nineteenth century, Zionism took the process another step forward by reading the Bible as a historical and political tract, while in contemporary Israel this Book of Books is now regarded as the bedrock of religious-national politics. Few if any people today recall the Maskilic and Zionist approaches to the Bible, which led to its being taught in the secular schools in Israel as an entirely nonreligious text.²

The following chapters, which originated as the opening set of lectures in the Brown Judaic Studies lecture series given at Brown University in the autumn of 2013, are case studies in the history of Israeli culture. They deal with the fertile and enriching tension between the programmatic cultural initiatives of the modern age and the premodern cultural forms that continued to exist, sometimes even thrive, on the Jewish street. They offer the reader an unconventional view of the scholarly discourse on Israel, without paying lip service to the kind of liberal apologetics that trivialize the discussion of cultural history and make scholarship the victim of political disputes. On the other hand, they also refuse to submit to the conservative sanctimony that idolizes past cultural unity and avoids confronting the pluralism and complexity of the burgeoning Zionist project.

The reader of these pages will not sense a yearning for any single version of the Jewish past: yearnings of that sort are cultivated by political ideologues of various stripes who tend to use history to serve their own ends. The book does not contain even a hint of the condemnation of the rich

1. The *Haskalah* (secular Jewish enlightenment) movement is generally recognized as originating in eighteenth-century western and central Europe. Adherents are known as Maskilim (singular, Maskil); they advocated for the renaissance of Hebrew into modern life, the study of secular sciences and languages, the participation of Jews in secular society, and the development of the modern Jewish press. See Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772–1881*, Jewish Culture and Contexts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 47–57, 90–101; Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, Jewish Culture and Contexts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Olga Litvak, *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism*, Key Words in Jewish Studies 3 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

2. On the “secularization” of the Bible by Zionist thinkers, Yishuv educators, and Israeli politicians, see Anita Shapira, “The Bible and Israeli Identity,” *AJS Review* 28.1 (2004): 11–41.

cultural creativity that emerged in the Land of Israel—a condemnation that remains popular in much of what is written and said in English in the field of Israel studies. It also contains neither the *schmaltz* of Yiddishkeit nor the anti-Israel demonization so prevalent in the commercial mass media, which shape discourse. Rather, it strives to penetrate the depths of the cultural processes that stood—and still stand—at the heart of the Israeli struggle to maintain a unique cultural identity, which draws upon the inexhaustible resources of the Jewish past and defends itself against the dangers of the present, while continuing to avail itself of the best offered by world culture.

History cannot be separated from politics, especially in a hyperpolitical society such as Israel. Although I know this very well, I have intentionally refrained from using terms prevalent in today's Israeli cultural discourse, such as *Mizrahi*.³ This is because the labeling of various Israeli ethnic and religious groups has entirely detached discussion of them from their broad historical context and the use of such terms in scholarly writing has been encouraged by their use in Israeli political discussions. Moreover, to the critical historian the present incarnations of ideas, trends, and parties in Israel often appear far distant from what they were just a few decades ago. That is why the terms "right" and "left," as presently used in Israel, have no place in the discussion here. Who, aside from experts in the history of Zionist ideology, remembers today that the Zionist "right," in the spirit of Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940) was identified with atheism, frank secularism, and support for the supremacy of the judiciary in the State of Israel? Equally, who is aware of the depth of the religious sentiment of Aharon David Gordon (1856–1922), one of the most influential thinkers of the "left," the Zionist labor movement? In any event, deep study of the history of Israeli political culture shows that "right" and "left" in Israel have sometimes resembled each other, sometimes mingled with each other, and often overlapped.⁴ It is sometimes hard to grasp the value of the simplistic political labeling, frivolously used by politicians, for the work of the historian.

Readers might be surprised by my decision to forgo the classical Israeli-Zionist periodization in this book. Historical discussions of this sort usually begin with the establishment of the Jewish agricultural settlements

3. Hebrew for "Eastern" or "Oriental" Jew. Translations of quotations and terms from Hebrew and other languages are my own unless otherwise noted.

4. The case of Joseph Trumpeldor (1880–1920), the Zionist activist and war hero killed in Tel Hai, is a good example of the blurred political identities in the New Yishuv. Both right- and left-wing Zionists regarded this iconic figure as a hero. The Revisionist Zionists named their youth movement Betar, an acronym for "Covenant of Yosef Trumpeldor," while the Socialist-Zionists remember him as a founder of the kibbutz movement. In the same year that he died, the Joseph Trumpeldor Work Battalion (*Gdud ha-avoda*)—a communist-minded labor organization was founded!

after the wave of pogroms that swept the Russian Empire in 1881–1882. I here propose a complete rejection of this periodization in the history of Israeli culture, which has been prevalent for decades in the field of Israel studies.

It is true that the origin of what is called the New Yishuv (or settlements, *ha-yishuv he-hadash*) in the history of Jewish society in the Land of Israel lay in the establishment of the first Jewish agricultural settlements in the late nineteenth century. If we are being precise, though, the first two Jewish agricultural settlements to be established in the Land of Israel—Gei-Oni in the Upper Galilee, and Petaḥ Tiqva on the boundary of Judea and Samaria—were in 1878, about four years before the rise of the *Hibat Tsiyon* (Love of Zion) movement in eastern Europe.⁵ And even this should not hide the fact that, until the first decade of British rule in Palestine, most of the Jews in the country belonged to the Old Yishuv (*ha-yishuv ha-yashan*)! This was the term used for the communities of religiously observant Jews who lived mainly in towns in the Judean Hills and the eastern Galilee, which means that the roots of some contemporary cultural phenomena in Israel lie in developments that took place well before the beginning of the Zionist settlement project.

The historical continuity between the Jews who lived in the country before the nationalist movement and the new settlers at the end of the nineteenth century has been played down for reasons that are primarily political and ideological. Paradoxically enough, that was a point of agreement between those intellectuals, historians, and politicians who were proponents of the Zionist idea and their ideological adversaries, the outspoken opponents of the Jewish national project in the Holy Land. Both cultivated the idea that there had been a break between what had taken place in the Land of Israel during the century prior to the First Aliyah (1881–1903) and what came later. Those who were proponents of the Zionist idea regarded the small religious Jewish community that lived in the Land of Israel as a degenerate branch of the diaspora, fixated on the tombs of the Jewish “saints” and destined to be swallowed up by the waves of national renewal. The opponents of the Jewish national project saw (and still see) the pre-Zionist Jewish community that had lived in the country for many generations, as part of the social and ethnic fabric of Palestine. In their eyes, this community fell victim to the Zionist invaders from Europe who violated the preexisting peaceful symbiosis between Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Historically speaking, what actually took place in the Land of Israel was far more complex and is reflected in neither of those one-dimensional

5. *Hibat Tsiyon* (Love of Zion) is a cluster of pre-Zionist associations that were established in 1881–1882 in the Russian Empire as a response to the rise in anti-Jewish pogroms. The movement was officially formalized in 1884 under Leon Pinsker.

scenarios. On the one hand, the cultural processes that shaped the colonies of the First Aliyah cannot fully be understood without taking into consideration the close connections between the Jews of Jerusalem, Safed, and Tiberias and the new settlers in the colonies in Judea and the Galilee. On the other, the Old Yishuv continued to maintain its own way of life, from which some of the new settlers sought to distance themselves, and in doing so substantially impeded the spontaneous processes of change and reduced the influence of those cultural agents propounding the new nationalism.

Three terms will appear throughout the discussion here that seem at first sight very similar, if not synonymous: Jewish, Hebrew, and Israeli. However, these refer to three different cultures that operated in Palestine from the beginning of the nineteenth century and together helped create the Israeli culture we know today. “Jewish” refers to the cultures of the pre-modern ethnic communities established in the country as diaspora outposts, which preserved heterogeneous ethnic and cultural formations that had originated generations before the first Zionist settlement. “Hebrew” (*Ivri*) refers to the innovative culture (or cultures) that the new, ideologically driven intellectual elites in the country wanted to establish. These were sectorial in nature, closely connected to different political parties and movements, and strongly influenced by Western imperial cultures. “Israeli” refers to the culture that arose out of the spontaneous development and growth of individuals and groups—who had either been born in the country or had immigrated from the four corners of the globe—within the Yishuv and later State of Israel. It contains a cluster of adaptations to the local situation, with its colors, voices, odors, climate, foods, and drinks, and became more varied with its contacts with a variety of non-Jewish populations. The Jewish and Hebrew components were born in the diaspora and came to the Land of Israel from outside. There they continued what had begun abroad, mostly in the multiethnic empires where the majority of Jews in the world lived until the mid-twentieth century. By contrast, the Israeli component was dependent solely on the special conditions in the Land of Israel and on direct encounters with its other inhabitants—Jews and non-Jews.

It is impossible to understand what happened in the Land of Israel while the Zionist project was slowly coming to fruition without taking into consideration the great transformations undergone by the Jews of eastern and central Europe in the modern period. Between 1750 and 1914, the conditions of their lives changed fundamentally. First and foremost, almost all the Jewish communities lost the political and sociological infrastructure that had made it possible for them to maintain a traditional way of life. The autonomous community, in which religion and ethnic identity were inseparable—that premodern entity in which the Jews preserved their faith, their laws, and their languages—disappeared. As a result, Jewish

cultures that had existed in most places until the nineteenth century within a political and social system that was corporative and feudal, lost their sociological basis. Both in the Russian Empire after the abolition of the *kahal*⁶ in 1844, and in the Ottoman Empire after the restoration of the constitution in 1908, the Jews found themselves in centralized states, exposed to the forces of emergent capitalism. Eventually, the rise of the modern state, the full flowering of the capitalist economy, and the appearance of new ideologies exposed the Jews to all the threats and seductions of modernity.⁷

Thus, a decisive factor in the formation of Jewish society in the Land of Israel over the past two centuries has been the crisis of the autonomous, premodern way of life, which has collapsed in the face of external political, economic, and cultural forces. In Palestine, the Old Yishuv managed to maintain a kind of replacement for their previous communities and to preserve premodern Jewish cultures with some success, while the New Yishuv developed some of the ways in which modern Jewry coped with the crisis. It managed to create a new and innovative social infrastructure and, within it, to anchor a nontraditional culture. Thus, in Palestine and later in the State of Israel, different substitutes for the social and cultural structures of the diasporas that had been crushed by the steamroller of modernity existed in parallel, close to each other and distant from each other.

Israeli culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century is without doubt a colossal success story. In my opinion, its success derives from its diversity, from its lack of uniformity, and from the constant subversion of the cultural discourse that aspired to hegemony. It draws upon the cultures of minorities, none of which was able to become predominant in the new country. It is nourished by the democratic power of cultural spontaneity, which introduced outside elements into the trends that the ideologues and political functionaries were trying to control.⁸ Its cultural scene is enriched by the continued existence of multiple political narratives

6. The *kahal* was the local, corporate governing institution within European Jewish communities that managed internal affairs and was the liaison to non-Jewish authorities.

7. As Rabbi David Ellenson has put it, "When modernity began, the issue for many Jews was 'how do I become modern.' Nowadays there is no problem with being 'modern.' When Jews judge Jewish culture, they judge it in light of values taken from the larger world. And for many a new issue arises—'how do I become Jewish'" (from "How Modernity Changed Judaism," interview with Rabbi David Ellenson, 15 September 2008, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 36, <https://jcpa.org/article/how-modernity-changed-judaism-interview-with-rabbi-david-ellenson/>).

8. Two recent publications shed new light on the major role of spontaneity in shaping the Israeli culture: Motti Neiger, *Publishers as Culture Mediators: The Cultural History of Hebrew Publishing in Israel (1910–2010)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: MN Publishing House, 2017); and Nathan Shazar, *The Songs of Our Youth: What We Sang in the Youth Movement* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 2018).

within Israeli society, and by the inability of any one, central authority to impose uniformity—even at the height of the statist policy of *mamlakhtiyut* (“statehood”) that was pursued by David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) during the first decades of the independent Israeli state. In addition, it is enriched by the persistence (sometimes invisibly) of various cultural elements brought from across the globe and integrated into the life of the Land of Israel.

Such variety and heterogeneity are generally described as a weakness by both those who oppose the Zionist enterprise and those who claim to be its enthusiastic supporters. In my view, however, this unplanned pluralism is the most impressive chapter in the cultural history of this new nation, which has managed to combine within it a variety of cultures and see itself as simultaneously continuing its heritage and rebelling against it.

BJS