



איר תשפ"ג | April 2023

חגים ומועדים – Holidays and Occasions

על גלגולי משמעות המלה "מדינה" – The Path to Statehood

Today the word **מדינה** designates a state – a sovereign state, as in **מדינת ישראל**, or a federated state within a sovereign state, such as those in the United States (notwithstanding its Hebrew name **ארצות הברית**). What earlier meanings lie along the word's semantic path to statehood?



The Hebrew word **מדינה** occurs over 50 times in the Bible, primarily in books from the Second Temple period. Found also in Biblical Aramaic and in other dialects of Aramaic, it is thought to have entered Hebrew from Aramaic. Biblical **מדינה** means 'province': e.g., King Ahasuerus rules 127 provinces – **שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה**. In view of other words from the same root, such as **דין** and **דין** ('law, judgment'; 'judge'), we may surmise that, fundamentally, **מדינה** denoted an area of jurisdiction.

In Rabbinic Hebrew, **מדינה** may refer to a province, a district, a subdistrict, or even a city. Some see in the sense 'city' the influence of the Greek concept of *polis*, 'city-state.' In Aramaic, too, **מדינה** sometimes denotes a city; and in Arabic, 'city' is the usual meaning – hence the name of the Saudi Arabian city of Medina. Rabbinic Hebrew exhibits, additionally, an idiosyncratic usage: Mishna Rosh HaShana 4:1, for instance, states that when Rosh HaShana fell on Shabbat, they would blow the shofar **במדינה** לא במקדש...אבל – i.e., in the Temple [some interpret: in Jerusalem]...but not **elsewhere in the Land of Israel**.

In Medieval Hebrew, as in Rabbinic Hebrew, the word **מדינה** may designate an administrative entity of varying size: R. Sa'adya Gaon calls Cairo **מדינת פסטאט**, 'the city of Fustat,' while Abraham Ibn Ezra refers to Egypt as **מדינת מצרים**. Meanwhile, Medieval philosophical texts in Arabic, including Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, use Arabic *madīna* for the Greek term *polis*; in turn, Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of the *Guide* renders this sovereign *madīna* as **מדינה**, giving the Hebrew word a boost toward statehood.

In the modern period, as in preceding periods, **מדינה** initially lacked uniformity of meaning, serving even for 'climatic zone.' However, it soon settled into its current sense, paving the way for the declaration of the establishment of **מדינת ישראל**.

שמות ומשמעויות – What's in a Name?

ישראל – Israel

An extra-Biblical reference to a people or tribe called **ישראל** appears as early as the 13th century BCE, on the victory stele of Pharaoh Merneptah. For thousands of years the name **ישראל** has been serving in multiple roles: in the Bible it refers to the forefather Jacob, the Israelites, or the northern kingdom that split off from Judah; and in Rabbinic literature – to the Jewish people, an individual Jew, or a Jew of neither priestly nor Levitical lineage.



Like many other ancient Semitic names, **ישראל** has a divine name embedded within it – in this case, **אל**. Alas, the meaning of the first component of the name remains uncertain to this day. In Gen. 32:29, the man who bestows the name upon Jacob after wrestling with him overnight gives the rationale **כִּי־שָׁרִית עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעַם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוֹכַל**, ‘for **you have struggled with G-d** and with men and have prevailed,’ implying that **ישראל** means ‘he strives with G-d’ (or: will strive, strove, etc. – the Hebrew form may express different tenses). This explanation reads the letters **ישראל** as a form of the verb **שָׁרָה** (from the root **שר״י**) – a verb found elsewhere in the Bible only in Hosea 12, in a restatement of this exegesis of the name.

Some ancient translations of the Bible render **שָׁרִית עִם־אֱלֹהִים** as ‘you were a prince with G-d’ or ‘you were great before G-d,’ which aligns with analyzing the first component of **ישראל** as a form of the verb **שָׁרָה**, ‘to rule’ (from the same root as **שר**, ‘prince’ – **שר״ר**). Indeed, it has been suggested that **ישראל** means ‘G-d rules.’ Another proposal adheres to the verb **שָׁרָה** but casts G-d as the subject: ‘G-d will fight.’

Some explications of **ישראל** swap the **ש** for **שׁ** – not a usual alternation in Hebrew. One such proposal links the name to **יִשְׂרוּן**, a poetic epithet for the people of Israel understood to express, via the root **ישׁ״ר**, the honesty and ingenuousness of the nation – a label that counterposes and rehabilitates Jacob’s crookedness (a trait hinted at by the very name **יעקב**, as Esau notes in Gen. 27:36). Another analysis reads in **ישראל** a form of the verb **שָׁרָה** (from **שו״ר**), ‘to see,’ yielding ‘G-d sees,’ ‘G-d will watch over.’

Today **ישראל** may seem the natural choice for the name of the modern state, but during the lead-up to the founding it was not the front-runner. The Jews of Palestine favored calling the state **ציון** or **יהודה** or **ארץ ישראל** – names ultimately rejected because they designated geographic areas not coextensive with the planned state.



הפְּרֵדַת רְשׁוּיּוֹת – separation of powers

The word **רְשׁוּת** designates a government body or other public authority, such as **רְשׁוּת הַדָּאָר**, the Postal Authority, or a branch of government: **הַרְשׁוּת הַמְּחֻקְקֵת**, the legislative branch; **הַרְשׁוּת הַמְּבַצֵּעַת**, the executive branch; or **הַרְשׁוּת הַשׁוֹפְטֵת**, the judicial branch. In Ethics of the Fathers 1:10, the early sage **שְׁמַעְיָה** exhorts us not to become intimate with – literally, become known to – the authorities: **וְאַל תִּתְדַע לְרְשׁוּת**. Note that the word **רְשׁוּת** differs from **רְשׁוּת** ('permission; possession') both in meaning and in pronunciation – *rashut* vs. *reshut* – though they look identical when unvocalized. According to most dictionaries, **רְשׁוּת** has the same root as **רֵאשׁ** – namely, **רֵאשׁ**; but some assign it to the same root as **רְשׁוּת** – i.e., **רֵשׁ**.

[להרחבה על רשות ורשות](#)



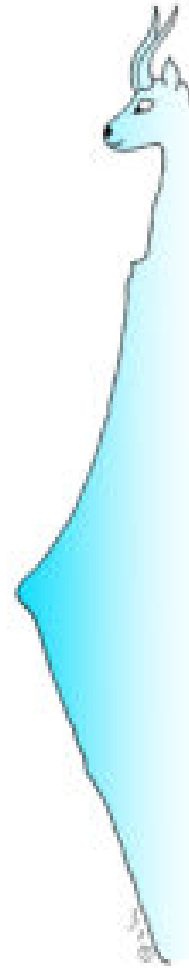
עֲרִיצוֹת הַרֵב – tyranny of the majority

In contemporary Hebrew one encounters the noun **עֲרִיצוֹת** less often than some other exemplars of the root **עֲרִיצ**, such as the verb **הִעֲרִיץ**. Today **הִעֲרִיץ** means 'to admire, idolize,' but in the Bible it means 'to fear, be afraid' and also 'to frighten, terrify'; so does its relative **עָרַץ**, as in **אַל-תִּירָאוּ וְאַל-תִּעַרְצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם**, 'do not be afraid or terrified of them' (Deut. 31:6). In this context the meaning of **עָרַץ** makes more sense: in the Bible it can mean 'cruel,' while today it serves for 'tyrannical' or 'tyrant.' As for the word **רֵב** – in the Bible it generally means 'plenty, an abundance,' as in **וְרֵב דָּגָן וְתִירָשׁ**, 'and an abundance of grain and wine' (Gen. 27:28), but today it serves primarily for 'majority' – along with **מֵעוֹט** for 'minority' – in line with its use in Rabbinic Hebrew.

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אֶרֶץ הַצִּבִי

The phrase **אֶרֶץ הַצִּבִי** (Dan. 11:16, 41) is an epithet for the land of Israel. Some websites render it 'land of the gazelle.' To be sure, gazelles are a fixture of the local landscape, as Biblical depictions attest; and the Biblical association of the land with the word **צִבִי** inspired Rabbinic exegeses likening the land of Israel to a gazelle (e.g., BT Ketubbot 112a). But **צִבִי** also denotes beauty or glory, as we can see from its juxtaposition or combination with equivalent words – e.g., **לְצִבִי וּלְכְבוֹד... לְגֵאוֹן** (Isa. 4:2) and **וּלְתִפְאֳרָתוֹ** (Isa. 4:2) and **צִבִי תִפְאֳרָתוֹ**, 'his glorious beauty' (28:1); the liturgical poem **שִׁיר הַכְּבוֹד** provides additional examples. The phrase **אֶרֶץ הַצִּבִי** probably uses **צִבִי** in the latter capacity, to express 'beautiful land,' 'glorious land.' The phrase **אֶרֶץ הַצִּבִי** thus closely resembles the phrases **אֶרֶץ הַמְּדֵה** (e.g., Jer. 3:19) and **אֶרֶץ הַפֶּחַח** (Mal. 3:12), commonly rendered 'pleasant land' and 'delightful land,' respectively.



Do these meanings of **צִבִי** have a shared origin? In Hebrew, both have the root consonants **צב"י**; but comparison to other Semitic languages reveals two distinct roots. Aramaic has a root **צב"י** likely related to the Hebrew 'beauty/glory,' but in Aramaic and Arabic 'gazelle' we find, instead of **צ**, a different consonant: **ט** in Aramaic (**טְבִיא**), **ظ** in Arabic (**ظبي**, as in Abu **Dhabi**, 'father of the gazelle' – translated by some as "land of the gazelle!").

Aramaic sheds light also on the other meaning of **צִבִי**. The Aramaic verb **צָבַא** (from **צב"י**) means 'to want, desire.' Hebrew's use of **צִבִי** for 'beauty, glory' extends the root's meaning from the action (desire) to its object (that which is desired). Similarly, the Hebrew verbs **הִפְחִיחַ** and **הִמְדָה** mean, respectively, 'to want, desire' and 'to covet,' while their associated nouns **הַפֶּחַח** and **הַמְּדָה** denote both desire and its object. Thus **אֶרֶץ הַפֶּחַח** and **אֶרֶץ הַמְּדָה** express, essentially, 'desirable land'; so too **אֶרֶץ הַצִּבִי**.

Memorial Day brings to mind "אֶרֶץ צִבִי," the moving theme song from the 1977 film **מִבְצַע יוֹנָתָן**, in English called *Operation Thunderbolt*. The film re-enacts Israel's rescue of the hostages in Entebbe; the song "אֶרֶץ צִבִי" pays tribute to the commander of the mission, Yonatan Netanyahu, who was killed during the raid, and gives voice to the deep bond between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. [Listen here to a 2014 remake of the song](#) with an added verse in memory of Ro'i Klein, who in the Lebanon War in 2006 heroically threw himself on a grenade to save his fellow soldiers.

[להרחבה באתר האקדמיה](#)

הרצאות מקוונות:
סלנג צבאי; הקולנוע ותחיית העברית

Upcoming Online Talks: Army Slang;
Film and the Revival of Hebrew



Join Dr. Ruvik Rosenthal, linguist and author of a book on the IDF's special dialect of Hebrew, for an illuminating look at army slang next Sunday, April 30, 2023. The following Sunday, Dr. Miri Bar-Ziv Levy will discuss the revival of Hebrew through the prism of early film and the cinema. Both talks will be in Hebrew on Zoom and will begin at 7:00 pm IDT. Participation is free, but space is limited; registration is required. Click on the links below to learn more and reserve your spot!

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הענק פרס רמון
לשלושה עובדים מצטיינים של האקדמיה

Ramon Prize Awarded to Three
Outstanding AHL Employees



AHL employees Doron Rubinstein, Shalev Farfel, and Dr. Mor Shemesh received the Uzi Ramon Prize at a well-attended ceremony at the Academy on April 19, 2023. Each spoke on a topic connected to his work: Rubinstein shared some dilemmas related to composing dictionary entries; Farfel discussed the transcription of Hebrew into Latin characters; and Shemesh looked at the distribution of Aramaic within the Hebrew of two Medieval Rabbinic texts. Mira Ramon established the prize in memory of her late husband Uzi (shown above; photo courtesy of Kibbutz Mizra and the Ramon family), who fell in action on June 7, 1967, to recognize scholarly achievement and encourage excellence among AHL employees.

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