

## LETTERS FROM GRANDPA

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Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. You have probably never heard of him. His story is inspirational, however, for he dedicated his life to something that seemed impossible. The Hebrew language had been a dead language for over 1,500 years and he dared to dream of reviving that language for the Jewish people. There are literally thousands of dead languages, but only Hebrew has come back to life. Modern Hebrew is the most popular language in Israel today. There are some 5 million native speakers and 9 million overall who speak Hebrew. It seems this miracle would not have become reality without Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. The following information has been condensed from an article by Jack Fellman. Fellman is a Hebrew scholar who earned his doctorate in Middle Eastern studies at Harvard in 1971.

American linguist Einar Haugen wrote in 1966 that movements invariably can be traced back to a single devoted person. As we have said, in this regard the "movement" to restore Hebrew can be traced back to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. He was born in Lithuania on Jan. 7, 1858. He emigrated to Palestine in 1881 with the burning desire to revive the Hebrew language. His first son, Ittamar Ben-Avi was born in 1882 and he and his wife determined to raise this boy as the first all-Hebrew speaking child in modern history.

To avoid confusing the child, when visitors came who did not speak Hebrew, the child was sent to bed. Since Hebrew was a dead language only a few were able to communicate. Further, Ben-Yehuda had to improvise. The ancient Hebrews, for example, knew nothing about electricity, ice cream, handkerchiefs, etc. Ben-Yehuda had to make up new words to make Hebrew relevant to modern society. He once verbally chastised his wife for singing in front of their child in her native Russian, for he wanted his son to be thoroughly trained and saturated with the Hebrew language.

Since teaching Hebrew to young people was key to his success, Ben-Yehuda jumped at the chance to teach Hebrew at the Alliance Israelite Universelle School in Jerusalem. After only a few months children were able to chat fluently in Hebrew regarding their daily activities.

The difficulties encountered, however, were gargantuan. There were no trained teachers fluent in Hebrew. There were no text books, games or songs in Hebrew. It is impossible to describe or imagine the pressure under which these first seeds were planted. As time went on, however, these problems were solved and a new generation of Hebrew speaking young people became a reality.

Ben-Yehuda, however, also wanted to teach adults. After writing for a few years in a local paper he began publishing his own Hebrew newspaper in 1884. It was, of course, somewhat of a novelty at the time. He dreamed of a time, however, when every Jew could read the news, weather, sports, fashions, etc. in the Hebrew language. His dream has come true!

To help all who wanted to speak Hebrew he began the monumental task of compiling a Hebrew Dictionary. His many 18 hour days resulted in publishing "A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew". It required 17 volumes. He was aided in solving the problems of terminology, pronunciation, spelling, and punctuation by founding the Hebrew Language Council in December 1890. This was the forerunner to today's Hebrew Language Academy which is now the supreme authority on Hebrew.

Of course Ben-Yehuda did not do it all on his own. Like the leader of any movement he recruited others and his efforts were contagious. New arrivals to Israel who were young, educated, and idealistic, formed a critical mass to turn his dream into reality. Thus in the forty years between 1881 and 1921 a core of young fervent Jewish patriots made the Hebrew language a unique symbol of their national identity.

In 1908 Ben-Yehuda wrote in his newspaper *Hatzvi*: “*For everything there is needed only one wise, clever and active man, with the initiative to devote all his energies to it, and the matter will progress, all obstacles in the way notwithstanding . . . in every new event, every step, even the smallest in the path of progress, it is necessary that there be one pioneer who will lead the way without leaving any possibility of turning back*”.

There are unlimited lessons we can learn from Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. For example, rather than passively floating downstream with the dregs of society, we can determine to swim against the current even if we have to do it by ourselves. If we have a family we can prayerfully enlist their efforts to join us. Recognizing the many powerful temptations to quit, we can jealously guard and protect our little flock from the wiles of the wicked one. Yes! The journey will be difficult. It may require 18 hour days and personal sacrifices too difficult to describe. **“If God be for us, however, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how shall He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** (Rom. 8:31,32). IN ALL THESE THINGS WE CAN BE MORE THAN CONQUERERS THROUGH HIM WHO LOVED US! PLEASE NEVER GIVE UP DOING WHAT IS RIGHT!

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce