

“Safe in Hebrew”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Each year languages die while others change and grow. Avatars of the internet will tell you that English is the pivot of the world's communication. Other tongues slip away, but English prevails.

When Saul Bellow met the great Hebrew writer Agnon in Jerusalem, Agnon asked him if his books had been translated into Hebrew. If not, Agnon urged him, he should see to it right away. But what about someone like Heine, Bellow asked, who wrote in imperishably beautiful German? “Ah, we have him beautifully translated into Hebrew,” Agnon answered. “He is safe.”

For Agnon, Bellow's legacy was tenuous until it was in Hebrew. After all, English is a relatively young language, but Hebrew is ancient and, Agnon was convinced, eternal.

A certain level of Hebrew literacy is also indispensable to understanding the Jewish tradition. American Jews neglect Hebrew, perhaps not realizing that they consign themselves to seeing the tradition second hand.

Agnon wrote the same words as Moses, and despite some differences, there was a continuity throughout the millennia. For Jews, Hebrew is God's mother tongue. No wonder Agnon thought that anything rendered in *lashon hakodesh*, the holy language, was safe.