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**Writing Systems: Romanization**

### **Changes in the Official Romanization System for Hebrew**

Submitted by Israel\*\*

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## Changes in the Official Romanization System for Hebrew

At the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1992, in a conference paper titled “The legal status of official endonyms in Israel”<sup>1</sup>, it was reported that in Israel toponyms approved by the Government Names Commission, sole authority on geographical names, are protected by law. Their use is mandatory for all Government institutions such as official maps, road signs etc. This situation has not changed.

Legal authority on the romanization of Hebrew is the Academy of the Hebrew Language. The official romanization system for Hebrew was devised by the Academy in 1956, and the undersigned presented it to the Third U.N. Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (Athens, 1977), which adopted it thirty years ago in resolution IV/13<sup>2</sup>, twenty years after it had been devised.

But in 1996, at the 18<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Israel submitted Working Paper No. 5 under the title “Theoretical and practical considerations for changes in the Romanization of Hebrew”<sup>3</sup>. This resulted from a first review of the practical application of the existing Romanization system over a period of 40 years.

Then, in 1998, at the Seventh U.N. Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names which was held in New York – a paper titled “Considerations for and against a revision of a Romanization system – the case of Hebrew” described in detail the problems encountered in Israel by the existing official romanization system<sup>4</sup>. These problems, and public pressure as well as the fact that non-Governmental agencies hardly use it, led the Academy of the Hebrew Language already in 1997 to begin considering a revision of its original system. This was aided by an actual statistical survey of pronunciation of romanized geographical names by non-Hebrew reading tourists. The principles of this survey were described in another paper presented by Israel to the Seventh Conference, under the name “A phonetic sample survey towards improvement of a romanization system”<sup>5</sup>. This survey was performed by interviewing and tape-recording 220 tourists entering Israel at Ben-Gurion International Airport, Tel-Aviv and resulted in 5500 name recordings, evaluated statistically for pronunciation. It is believed that this was the first (and perhaps only) time that a methodical large-scale survey was employed in order to test and improve a transliteration system.

The approach towards improvements to the system were based mainly on the following factors.

(a) The areas of application of the romanization system, whether in scientific or “bibliographical” use, in general literature, in linguistics, in “navigating” with the aid of maps and road signs, etc..

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<sup>1</sup> E/CONF.85/L.4 of 17 June 1992.

<sup>2</sup> E/CONF.69/4, 1979, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> GEGN/18, 23 June 1997, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> E/CONF.91/L.11 of 7 November 1997.

<sup>5</sup> E/CONF.91/CRP.5 of 9 January 1998.

- (b) In the latter application, the mutual relationships between maps and road signs. There must be virtual identity between names in official (and preferably other) maps on the one hand and road signs on the other, both sides having their particular characteristics such as typeface (font), use of capital and lower-case, Roman vs. italics, colour, hyphenation, etc. See e.g. Kadmon, 2000<sup>6</sup>.
- (c) The degree of reversibility (if any) required.
- (d) The use of diacritical signs and their reduction.
- (e) Changes in the standard pronunciation of Hebrew over a quite short period of 50 years, resulting partly from changes in the composition of the Israeli population. This seems to have been the dominating factor in the Academy's deliberations. In 1956 the Academy tried to fit the romanization to the "Eastern" pronunciation of Hebrew as the standard, with some of its guttural sounds such as ן, ף and ך (which even at that time was on the decline). This is quite evident in the diacritics-rich "precise or scientific" romanization of Hebrew which is still in force for specific applications such as in bibliographical and literary work. Over the course of 50 years the approach to a more "popular" system has changed towards a more "Western" pronunciation, to be reflected in the revised romanization.

So now, after 50 years of use of the old system, the Academy of the Hebrew Language, following deliberating and consulting with numerous experts and institutions (in particular those engaged in mapping and road-signing) for several years, has finally decided on a number of changes in the romanization rules for Hebrew, and has ratified and published the revised system in November, 2006. In the heading to this publication, the directive of the Academy states explicitly that these simplified rules apply specifically to maps and road signs. The main changes from the "old" system – the latter described in detail e.g. in the "Report on the current status of United Nations romanization systems for geographical names" compiled by the UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems, version 2.2, January 2003 – are as follows.

- The letter ן as a consonant\* is transliterated V,v instead of Ww;
- The letter ף is transliterated Ts,ts instead of Z,z;
- The letter ך is transliterated K,k instead of Q,q;
- The letters ם and ן , both represented by ' , are represented only (and always) in the middle of a name, whereas in the past ן was represented also at the beginning or end of a word.
- The shva-na (previously romanized sheva-na') is represented by E,e only where it is actually sounded. Example: בְּנֵי-בְּרַק > Bne-Brak; previously Bene-Beraq; but גְּאוּלִּים > Ge'ulim.

\* As a pointed vowel it remains unchanged as ם (O,o) or ן (U,u).

The number of diacritically-marked (underscored) letters has thus been reduced by one, and the use of the apostrophe has been limited to within-word situations.

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<sup>6</sup>N. Kadmon, *Toponymy – the Lore, Laws and Language of Geographical Names*, New York, 2000, para. 17.3, "The seven graphic variables of names in maps".

Whereas stability in a Romanization system is of great value, its practical applicability is of even greater importance. There are already signs that the new rules make the new system easier to use; it is a fact that some private and non-Governmental public agencies, and especially map producers, have been using similar non-official systems for years.

The amended system is now in the early stages of implementation. Since the Israeli Government decreed that within five years all road signs and maps, both in Hebrew and in romanization, must carry identical name forms following the new system – it will require some time until the new rules will have been applied throughout the country.

The text for an appropriate resolution concerning the new romanization of Hebrew is being presented in a separate paper.

### Summary

After 50 years of use, the official romanization system of Hebrew has now been somewhat amended. The paper points out the reasons for the changes and lists the five main diversions from the “old” system, which were ratified in November 2006. They are now in the early stages of implementation. A government directive states that application in all official road signs and maps should be completed within five years.