

The following document consists of scenarios a Jewish professional might encounter when dealing with Hebrew education in a variety of settings. Key questions are offered for reflection as well as suggestions for possible solutions. If you have any further suggestions or comments, please address them to tartak@huc.edu. Todah Rabbah!

Hebrew Scenarios

1) You are the new 7th grade teacher at Temple A. Part of your job is making sure students can read and chant Hebrew prayers in the Shabbat service. Each student is required to master this skill before Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Each student has his/her own siddur to keep. By the third week of school, you discover that David, one of your 7th graders, has written English transliteration above the Hebrew words. His Bar Mitzvah is next month. You speak to the Cantor, who officially reviews prayers with every student before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and he says he knows about David’s secret of not being able to read Hebrew. The Cantor is frustrated that David fell through the cracks, but can’t do anything about it because he himself is overworked with too many students. Besides, he says, it is not his job to be a Hebrew teacher. You are not sure what to do.

What are the conflicting values you face as a new Hebrew teacher?

This situation is similar to memorizing prayers, which we acknowledge is a natural pattern once a prayer is repeated often. So we must begin with asking what are the goals of the educational institution – what does the institution want its students to be able to accomplish?

There seem to be different professional and job expectations between the professionals. How to avert a power play between the cantor and the new teacher?
If the student is not ready, do we postpone the Bar Mitzvah?

Discuss possible solutions or next steps you, as the new teacher, could do to improve or correct this situation.

- Tutor for the student
- Check for learning differences.
- Find out what is going on in the life and studies of the student
- Test other students in the same class to be sure there are not other students falling through the “cracks.”
- Look at the Hebrew skills foundation offered by the previous grade level teacher.

2) You are on the board of the synagogue’s religious school. At present, you are satisfied with the Hebrew program, however, at tonight’s meeting the school principal presents you with an issue about Hebrew. Several parents have complained that their children are really bored in Hebrew class. Both the kids and the parents see little or no value in learning prayer Hebrew that they cannot speak or “use in later life”. They really want to learn to speak Hebrew and they are convinced that there is enough time (2 hours per week) to learn basic spoken Hebrew. The principal understands their frustration, but

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is currently obligated to produce students who are comfortable and proficient with Siddur Hebrew, which according to her requires 2 hours per week of learning.

What are the conflicting values you face as a board member?

- Is the system failing? Is it the wrong curriculum or wrong teacher?
- What about those students who never intend to go to Israel? What are their needs?
- How do we want to spend our time and money resources?
- What is the depth of knowledge of the current students and faculty, and what depth do they want?
- Do we have the appropriate teaching staff?
- Are we will to impose more demands on our student’s already restricted time?
- Modern Israeli Hebrew or ancient Biblical Hebrew?

Discuss possible solutions or next steps you, as a board member, could do to improve or correct this situation.

- Create 2 tracks in the program – second track to integrate Modern Hebrew
- Redo the class and teach both
- Restructure the methods used in the classroom to make more dynamic and interesting
- Must be engaging!

3) At your pulpit or internship one of your responsibilities is to teach a beginning adult Hebrew class. You are really excited until you discover after the first session that the adults are at a variety of different levels. Some know the letters and are bored relearning them, whereas others are totally new to Hebrew and Judaism and feel that the class is going too fast. After class two students then request to learn some spoke Hebrew. You want to address all the students’ needs, but are not sure how. In fact one of the “complainers” is the Temple president.

What are the conflicting values/issues?

- the levels, expectations, goals and life experiences of the different learners
- what are the goals of the class?
- politics

Discuss possible solutions or next steps you, as the student intern, could take to improve or correct this situation.

- Assuming adults are willing to take on extra work to get to the level of the majority of students, offer one-day reading marathon as a prerequisite for those who don’t read at all
- To keep number of students level, offer “beginner one semester and “beginner plus” the next semester

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- Divide class in ½ -- different times to meet with you and using different level of materials
- Divide class into parts: reading, biblical, spoken and allow students to decide which section(s) they want to attend
- Work in chevruta
- Change the focus or topic each week and announce in advance so students can decide whether or not to attend

4) You are the new Hebrew educator for a congregation. One of your first duties is to address the families of 5th-6th graders explaining to them why in these grades a second day of school is added, devoted to learning Hebrew. Before the program begins, parents are ganging up on you and stating that they are not going to bring their children on the second day because they don't think Hebrew “needs that much time”. Their children are already over-programmed and stressed and don't need an extra day learning a language they only need for one day, at the bar/bat mitzvah. You are shocked and hurt and are not sure how to proceed in your scheduled program.

What are the conflicting values/issues you now face?

- Are you willing to lose congregants?
- Did the congregation have input in this decision?
- What are the parents' expectations?
- Looking at the culture of the synagogue, is Hebrew valued for adults in the general congregation?

Discuss possible solutions or next steps you, as the Hebrew educator, could do to improve or correct this situation.

- If the goal is to decode, but understand what is being read, this can be achieved in a shorter time frame.
- Clarify the goal of learning Hebrew
- Make parents active in the decision-making. (What to do with parents who only want Hebrew for Bar/Bat Mitzvah?)
- Need to table the decision and take back to committee.

Concerns & Suggestions from participants:

IMPROVING READING SKILLS:

- Alternate with students: teacher makes a mistake and the kids have to correct (forces the kids to listen and read)
- Listen to words and act/pantomime them.

TEACHING ADULTS without being childish

- Using sense of humor to convey compassion for adult needs
- Use an appropriate textbook!

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- Mutual respect of their life experiences and the teacher’s Judaic learning
- Acknowledge the difficulty of learning at this age and compliment their efforts
- Let them see they already do know some words (Shabbat, Shema...)
- Offer as much material as they can possibly take
- Be aware of feelings, have concerns and issues about their previous attempts, etc.
- Be aware adults are afraid to look stupid or ask too many questions, so we need to privately check their levels

TIME ISSUES

- Check out the experiential programs – winter camps in Modern Hebrew, 3 or 4 day intensives
- Not a case of highly individual or private tutoring, but maximizing our impact
- Integrate Hebrew vocabulary in all classes – repetition of words in different subjects

INSTILLING A LOVE OF HEBREW

- Not isolating it to Hebrew class
- Teach must be enthusiastic
- Use cultural words on a daily basis – name the rooms in Hebrew, etc.
- Change the culture of your institution