

Jessica Ingram

The Challenge of Teaching Hebrew in America

Hebrew education in our congregational schools is in a state of crisis. Our students struggle for years to learn the letters, vowels, and sounds they need in order to “perform” successfully at their B’nai Mitzvah. Students are not learning to read, they do not comprehend the meaning of prayers they recite, and perhaps most importantly, they do not enjoy the time they spend studying Hebrew. Considering that beginning in third or fourth grade, Hebrew education consumes about fifty percent of all religious studies in supplemental programs, this is a sorry state and needs to be addressed creatively, efficiently, and immediately. However, before we can effectively move forward, we need to have an understanding of how our current methods of Hebrew education have evolved.

Talmud Torahs were established in many communities throughout the mid to late nineteenth century, and it was through them that Jewish children in America were first introduced to Hebrew. When the *ivrit be-ivrit* method was developed and introduced in Europe, the movement quickly spread to America, where its first school opened in 1893. The method gained popularity under the leadership of Samson Benderly, who believed that the teaching of Hebrew would inspire a Jewish cultural revolution, one that would prevent assimilation and promote unity and loyalty among the Jewish community (Sarna, 16). Additionally, Benderly argued that Hebrew was a necessary tool and “the shortest and most attractive road to the bible and the Prayer Book” (Sarna, 17). Due to the efforts of Benderly and one of his successors, Emanuel Gamoran, the number of students who studied Hebrew in Reform schools doubled between 1924 and 1948 (Meyer, in Sarna).

The establishment of the State of Israel normalized the use of Hebrew as a modern language, giving it the legitimacy it needed to be studied in high schools and colleges as a “foreign” language. The 1960s and 70s saw Hebrew education become a fixed part of the curriculum, but the trend peaked with the success of the Six Day War and the exponential increase of support for Israel after 1967. By the next decade, the concept of *ivrit be-ivrit* completely collapsed, and since then, Hebrew education has been drastically weakened (Band, 180-181). Jonathan Sarna suggests that the collapse happened because it no longer met the changing needs of the American Jewish community (Sarna, 18).

In the eighties, Reform congregations embraced informal education, leading to less time being spent on formal language study (Glinert, 235). A 1986 survey conducted by Steven Cohen indicated that a mere five percent of Reform Jews claimed a minimal competence in Hebrew (Moragh, 192). This was made even more clear by the fact that throughout the decade, students participating in university Judaic Studies programs arrived with less and less Hebrew ability, primarily because many of their programs were able to be studied in English (Band, 183).

There are probably few topics in the field of congregational education that are as challenging and heatedly debated as the teaching of Hebrew today. When a congregational educator designs a Hebrew curriculum, he or she must address a number of issues. Alan Mintz succinctly poses the questions that all educators confront when defining the goals of their educational program: “Speaking skills vs. reading skills? Biblical, rabbinic, or modern Hebrew?” (Mintz, 22)

Because of the emphasis placed on the B’nai Mitzvah ceremony, and the time constraints on the congregational school system, the Hebrew curriculum of most supplemental schools focuses primarily on preparation for this occasion. Students typically begin by learning the

letters, combining them with vowels to make simple sounds, and trying to decode words and phrases, typically the blessings for their Bar or bat Mitzvah. At some point in the year before the ceremony, they usually receive private lessons from their rabbi, cantor, or a tutor to help them prepare for their Torah and Haftarah portions. But, this process is far from successful, for a number of reasons. Joel Hoffman, in a class session entitled, “Four ways we destroy Hebrew education” suggests that we as educators forget what it means to actually read. Reading, he reminds us, is the act of turning text into meaning, which is not the same as pattern recognition, also known as decoding. Students are not reading the blessings, the prayers or their Torah portions- they are simply sounding them out, reading and chanting them over and over until they have been memorized. Hoffman reminds us that we have to know what our goals are. He suggests that if our goals are to have students know the letters and have them know the prayers, that we actually need to separate the goals so they are no longer in competition with each other.

He also points out that by adding pieces of grammar, liturgy, and Modern Israeli Hebrew (MIH) to the Hebrew curriculum; we further put students at a disadvantage. The amount of grammar introduced is nowhere near enough to be of significant value to their understanding of the language, and is instead, complicating and detrimental. Liturgy, he asserts, even if taught well, is usually too sophisticated for a grade school students’ level of understanding, and MIH, though it is what typically gets students excited to learn Hebrew, differs enough from Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew that problems inevitably arise while a primary goal in B’nai Mitzvah prep.

Hoffman presented his theory on how to address these significant concerns, and based on what we have learned throughout the semester, I will humbly add some of my own ideas to the framework he provides.

Hoffman argues that in the end, most students are simply memorizing what they need to know anyway, so educators should simply acknowledge and support this fact. He goes on to say that the best way for students to learn the prayers is by designating more time for tefillah. If students, starting from a young age, participate in weekly prayer services that are fun, music-filled experiences, a significant portion of the B'nai Mitzvah preparation will have already been (successfully) accomplished. Then, he believes, by fifth grade students will have a desire to learn the letters that make up the words they already know and will feel confident in their ability to do so. He suggests that taught this way, students will achieve the same decoding fluency in one year that now takes them many years to accomplish rather poorly.

Once that pressure is taken off the Hebrew curriculum, there will be a lot more freedom to explore other aspects of the Hebrew language. Joel recommends some ideas for post-fifth grade education, including occasionally inserting an MIH class into the curriculum, but he doesn't really flush out what a sixth and seventh grade curriculum could actually look like. Ideally, I believe that students who have mastered both the prayers and the alphabet by fifth grade should have the option to enter a sixth grade MIH class; those who might need extra time feeling comfortable with the alphabet and simple decoding could use this time for that purpose. Then, by seventh grade, when preparing for B'nai Mitzvah has become all-consuming, students could return to the tefillah model, leading services for the younger students. During this year, time would also be spent studying Hebrew through the liturgy, addressing the meaning of the prayers and blessings and allowing students to glean their own personal meanings from them.

Joel's model is a relatively radical approach when compared to the minor adjustments that have been made to the existing system of Hebrew education in recent years. However, in addition to addressing the Hebrew education crisis, this model also speaks to a challenge I have

noticed in my own education and work experience. I believe that Jack Wertheimer's observations about the presence of "silos" in the Jewish world do not apply simply to individual organizations that do not maximize the potential for effective cooperation (Wertheimer, 2005). I believe that silos exist *within* institutions such as synagogues or even Hebrew Union College as well. Within the synagogue, prayer is often reserved for Friday nights, with the "B'nai Mitzvah service" on Saturday mornings and the occasional holiday service as well. While many religious schools have a *tefillah* component, it is often sporadic and watered down. If schools began a weekly prayer service, allowing for different styles of services, students would feel more comfortable not only with their own *minhag* but those of other communities. Some services could even be led by the rabbi or cantor, allowing more meaningful relationships to begin young and in a more hand-on context. No matter how it was designed, creating a regular prayer experience within the religious school context would foster a deeper level of comfort and connectedness between what is often a separate entity in the synagogue and the larger community.

I do not presume that this would be an easy model to introduce into any congregation. Parents inevitably worry about their children's ability to "read" from the Torah, and membership committees worry that they will lose new families to "the synagogue down the street" because their Hebrew program begins immediately. I'm not even sure what measures would have to be in place to help those students who did not succeed with this model. But, I do believe that a forward thinking congregation that is truly committed to its students' learning and appreciating the Hebrew language has to be willing to take some risks, and this model is worth the risk. Even if the primary goal of stronger Hebrew ability is not achieved, there are additional benefits such

as the familiarity with the prayer service and stronger community relationships, as mentioned earlier.

Despite the current state of Hebrew education and what it indicates about the priorities of the Jewish community, all is not lost. Interestingly, if we return to the ideas of the early American Jewish educators and their feelings about the teaching of Hebrew we can gain a lot. Benderly argued that knowledge of Hebrew provided the most effective access to the prayer book and the Bible, neither of which has changed since the time of his leadership. A new model, such as the one proposed here, seeks to deepen the connection between the study of Hebrew and familiarity with our sacred texts. Furthermore, the vision of cultural Zionism, as espoused by both Benderly and Ahad Ha'am, still has the potential to be the medium which would tie children "with bonds of love and reverence to their people and its land" (p. 109). If we as educators are to promote the growth of our communities into a congregation of learners, as Isa Aron encourages, we need to embrace the opportunity to make cultural connections for our students, and what better way to do that than with the study of Hebrew?

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