

Meaningful Hebrew Education Can Lead to a Stronger Jewish Identity

According to Hayyim Greenberg, Hebrew is not merely a language. It is an alphabet, it is Jewish liturgy, it is the bible, it is the Talmud, it is midrash and it is modern Israeli literature. To sum this up, we could say that Hebrew is our history, our heritage, our present and our past; it is our religion and it is our culture.¹

Although Hebrew never completely died, it maintained a rich existence in the religious world, the language was revived as a spoken language in the late 19th century by enlightened scholars in Europe. In his article “Hebrew, a Language of Identity” published in the Journal of Jewish Education, Gilead Moragh writes, “Contributing significantly to the survival of Hebrew as a living language was the use of written Hebrew as a means of communication.”²

For Ahad Ha-am, Hebrew had the role of being both a “unique expression of the Judaic heritage and a key instrument of the creative survival of the Jewish people.”³ He believed that the Hebrew language was fundamentally needed for the survival of the Jewish people, both in the Diaspora and in the land of Israel. It was commonly held that in order for the Jewish people to truly be a nation, they needed a lingua franca. It was the hope of the Hebrew revivalists that Hebrew would be this uniting force among Jews around the world.

But as we see, 150 years later, Hebrew is not the lingua franca of the Jewish people. Those living in the Diaspora seem to have a cursory knowledge of the language. In United States supplementary schools, we see this most acutely specifically. The majority of students remain in these schools until 7th grade, or until they become bar or bat mitzvah, and their knowledge is limited to the few prayers and short Torah portion that they are required to know in order to

¹ (Schiff, 1996)

² (Moragh, 2000)

³ (Moragh, 2000)

become a bar or bat mitzvah. The students regard their time in these supplementary schools as merely something that is required of them, a requirement that offers them very little enjoyment, like a chore, and they wait for the day they become a bar or bat mitzvah, not only because they are anticipating this important Jewish rite of passage, but also because it will mark the end of their time at supplementary Hebrew school. We are clearly failing our students, and I think it is because, as educators, we do not have a clear purpose of Hebrew education.⁴ While we recognize that bar and bat mitzvah preparation is a large part of our curriculum, we need to inspire and teach our students beyond that in order to give them a Jewish foundation on which to stand. But what does that mean for Hebrew? And exactly what role does Hebrew play in our lives and the lives' of our students beyond the bar or bat mitzvah⁵? We will see that Hebrew plays a vital role in a child's Jewish education, and even more so, it aids in building and strengthening their Jewish identity. Hebrew is a language unique to the Jewish people and the Jewish people. It has the ability to connect us to both our past and our present, to other American Jews and to Jews throughout the world. No matter what country you are in, we as Jews all pray in the same language.

In Elana Goldberg Shohamy's article "Contextual and pedagogical factors for learning and maintaining Jewish languages in the United States,"⁶ she lays out several roles of Hebrew in modern society. In order to know why we teach Hebrew, we need to understand its different purposes.

⁴ (Schiff, 1996)

⁵ (Shohamy, 2000)

⁶ (Shohamy, 2000)

One important role that Hebrew plays is its link to Jewish identity. While Shohamy remains ambivalent towards Hebrew playing an essential part in one's identity, Gilead Moragh, in his article, "Hebrew, a Language of Identity" writes,

"If we accept the premise that there is a Jewishness that transcends all Judaism and binds them together, and if we try to identify the components that constitute this Jewishness, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Hebrew is a crucial unifying element and that abandoning Hebrew education in America may very well mean abandoning one of the primary defenses against the fragmentation and dissolution of the Jewish people."⁷

Moragh makes a bold statement, and one that I cannot completely disagree with. Hebrew is a vital, unifying characteristic of the Jewish people. But I will go one step further and state that not only abandoning Hebrew education would prove detrimental to Jewish unity, but teaching Hebrew the way we are teaching Hebrew now will also prove detrimental. I maintain that the way we are teaching Hebrew now does not build relationships to Judaism and other Jews, but rather it serves as an alienating factor because it is not something that the student can relate to or truly understand.

Learning to read and speak Hebrew may provide a link to Judaism that will anchor our American students to Judaism, and provide them with a sense of unity in other Jews. But they will not have this link if we continue to teach them "*siddur*" (liturgical) Hebrew to prepare them for to become b'nei mitzvah. In order to make Hebrew that unifying force that the revivalists imagined we need to teach them not only to truly understand the words that they are saying when they read from the *siddur* or when they read from the Torah, but also how to communicate with Israelis conversationally.

⁷ (Moragh, 12)

A second and not entirely different role that Hebrew plays is its link to Israel. But just as the Hebrew language we teach to our students now does not foster a strong Jewish identity, neither does it strengthen any bond to the Jewish homeland. The Hebrew that our students are learning in their supplementary classrooms is not the same Hebrew spoken on the streets in Israel or read in the classrooms of an Israeli school. The Hebrew that we find ourselves teaching here in the United States is a tool for our students to use in the synagogue on the day they become a bar or bat mitzvah. It will not help them communicate with Israelis on those Israel trips we encourage our students to go on, yet it is all we have time to teach with the limited number of hours that we have our students weekly. It can only be our hope that while in religious school, our students will identify with Israeli Jews because they recognize the same letter and can read the same language.

A third role of Hebrew is that it provides us with a connection to our Jewish heritage. While this is not the language of many of our students' grandparents, who in most probability spoke Yiddish (I do mean to exclude students from Sephardic and Mizrahi backgrounds, but most of our students in the religious schools in which we teach do were born to families of Ashkenazi descent, although we may have some students whose parents and grandparents speak modern Hebrew, Ladino and Farsi) it does provide us with a link to our forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Moses; Aaron and Miriam; the Kings of Israel and Judah; the Maccabees, the Zealots, and finally, to the Rabbis. According to Shohamy, “this argument claims that knowledge of Hebrew will bring Jews closer to their roots, to their heritage...[but that] it could not connect to anything social and real.” (25) Therefore, according to Shohamy, the Hebrew we teach may suffice. Yet I will argue that by connecting all Jews to that same past, we will provide our students with something that is social and real. Through a

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shared connection to our past, even a constructed heritage, it allows for a shared memory that all Jews are able to connect with one another.

A fourth, and final function of Hebrew is that of symbol—a symbol of Jewish peoplehood and Jewish learning. But as a symbol, we would require our students truly to be able to understand what they say, to be able to speak and read the language. Yet if the purpose of Hebrew is merely symbolic, then our students need only to be able to decode the Hebrew prayers during their bar or bat mitzvah service, because it only then that they will need to be able to show others that they know how to “read” and chant. According to Shohamy, “no meaningful achievement should be expected.” (26) While Shohamy makes an important point here, I do not know if I agree with her. Shohamy defines symbol on a shallow level. It is merely for show. Yet it is also possible to define symbol much deeper. A symbol is one thing, a picture, song, language that represents something so much larger. For example, no one would assume that the Statue of Liberty is a shallow emblem in which no real meaning can be assumed. Rather it was an image that represented freedom, hope, promise, to the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who came from all over to the United States. Therefore we can also see Hebrew as symbol of a people who have endured for thousands of years, through promise and heartache. If Hebrew symbolizes thousands of years of heritage, should we not expect high achievement among our students? Should we not encourage them, and teach them to understand the words that they are reading?

Yet clear vision is only one resource we lack in our Hebrew supplementary school, and while it is a large aspect of the education we provide, it may be one of the easiest aspect to fix. Each of us as Jewish educators have a vision of why we think that Jewish education, specifically Hebrew education is important. If we did not, we would not be in the fields we are in. It is up to

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us then to not only realize our vision, but to convey it to our clergy, our board, our teachers, in hopes that we can all share in this vision. It is up to each of us to ask ourselves “Why is Hebrew important?” “Why do we even teach it?” When we are able to answer these questions, we will know what our vision for Hebrew education is.

Beyond the lack of vision there also seems to be a lack of goals among educators, whether they are directors of education, teachers, clergy members, board members, parents and students, as well as a lack of understanding of our students’ needs. Most religious school Hebrew curricula are created on the premise that all students learn the same material at the same speed in the same ways, but as educators, we are aware that this simply is not true. We have students with different emotional, physical, mental and learning capabilities, which invariably change the dynamics in the classroom. As educators, we need to be able to take into account those different needs, and create an environment and a curriculum that will take all of these variables into account, and allow students to learn in ways that they can feel successful as well as a sense of belonging.

A fourth resource that we find ourselves lacking is qualified Hebrew teachers. The majority of Hebrew school teachers are Israeli, and while they may be fluent in the subject, they are often unable to relate to our American students who are learning Hebrew as a second language. It is not enough to be able to speak the language, but they need to know how to be able to teach it. Without these pedagogical skills, Hebrew instruction often becomes difficult both for our teachers and for our students.

Time may be one of our greatest weaknesses in the resource department, and it encompasses so much. First, we have our students for a limited amount of hours each week. Most Hebrew schools are in session for two to three hours a week. This is not very much time to

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teach them a new language that requires learning a new alphabet with a completely different consonant and vowel system. The second issue with time is the actual time of day when Hebrew School meets. In most cases, Hebrew schools are run during the week, usually beginning around 4:00 in the afternoon. This is after our students have put in a full day at their secular schools, with a long night of sports, music or homework looming in front of them. Mentally, our students are unprepared and unable to settle down to learn more at this time. A third time related problem is perhaps the only one outside of our control, though not necessarily. In addition to our own restricted hours, we are often faced with high rates of absenteeism because of all the extra-curricular activities in which our students participate. Because of this lack of commitment from the families, students often fall behind and because of the lack of real consequences are not motivated to catch up.

I do not want to appear pessimistic about the prognosis of supplementary Hebrew programs. On the contrary, I believe that it is within our ability as educators to create a program in which our students will feel successful and enjoy being and practicing to be, Jews. Through understanding what role Hebrew plays in our lives, the lives of our students and congregants, we as educators will not only have a clear vision of what we want to accomplish, we will also be able to set up patent goals for our schools. Additionally, there are now curricula available, which take into consideration the needs of our students, their different capabilities, seek out to interest, and motivate them through graphics, colors and characters. The URJ press has published their *Mitkadem* Hebrew program, which allows students to work at their own pace. It also teaches them the tools to be able to not only decode, but to really read with prayers with understanding, and to think critically about the prayers in both a Reform context and a larger Jewish context. Torah Aura also has many interesting Hebrew curricula that focus' on the meanings of the prayer

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and connects each prayer to the larger Jewish world through providing them with Midrash and Biblical stories, which relate to the prayers. By creating a strong policy in our schools, which incorporates the vision of our congregations, we can create educated and committed Jews. It just begins with vision, goals and the proper resources. It is within all of our reaches.