

A Tale of Two Classes:

An Examination of the Place of Hebrew in the Religious School

I wish to recount for you “a tale of two classes.” As I walk into the first class, I am immediately struck by the ebullient energy and excitement filling the air. The atmosphere is charged and vibrant, filled with students’ gleeful voices, eager to contribute their thoughts, questions, and revelations. The students are engaged in the content, with the teacher, and with each other. Their energy is infectious and it is close to impossible to avoid being lured into the magic of their experience, into the thrill of their chase for answers.

As I walk into the second class, however, I immediately discover a severe shift in mood. The class is withdrawn and lethargic. The students are disengaged and many are visibly frustrated. Heads are on tables, arms are crossed, and eyes are glazed. The lack of both interest and motivation is painful for the students, and especially for the teacher who appears helpless and defeated by the content to which she is bound. My delight at the experience of the first class immediately disappears as I observe the anguish of the students in the second class.

My shock at the striking disparity between the two classes came not from the fact that they are in the same school, or even taught by the same teacher; most shocking is the fact that I was observing the *same class* learning two different subjects. In the Judaica portion of the class, the students were learning about one of the Genesis stories. In the Hebrew portion, the students were learning two more letters to add to their reading repertoire. Can you guess which class description corresponds to which subject?

I admit that it is potentially problematic to compare the excitement generated from a Genesis story to the excitement generated from a Hebrew class and that the examples that I illustrated are fairly extreme. Yet the concept of students who are disengaged, bored, and

frustrated when learning to read Hebrew is neither novel nor rare. The fact that this class of students is spending half of their already limited time at religious school with their heads on the tables is incredibly troubling to me. Equally troubling is the fact that a majority of these students are leaving religious school with Hebrew reading skills that are not much more advanced than when they first entered the school. I believe that our students, and the potential success for supplementary Jewish education, are suffering at the hands of the Hebrew curriculum.

Might the answer be, therefore, to remove Hebrew from the religious school curriculum altogether? At the risk of sounding radically controversial, I believe that this is a realistic and reasonable option. But I wish, first, to take a few steps back and re-acquaint myself with the broader goals of Hebrew education, most of which, in my opinion, have been long neglected. Why do we teach Hebrew, or more specifically and accurately, why do we teach the skill of reading Hebrew?

Of the answers I typically receive to this question, the most common is the ability of students to participate in the prayer service. Another common and related answer is the student's ability to read the necessary texts (Torah, Haftarah, Prayers) for their B'nei Mitzvah. While I understand the pragmatic nature of these goals, I do not accept their validity or their proof for meriting the establishment of a Hebrew-reading curriculum. On the most basic level, these two goals could be accomplished through private tutoring sessions, rather than spending class time to attempt to teach a language to myriad different levels and student needs. On a deeper level, though, I question the meaning of participation as it relates to *tefilah*. Does the ability to read Hebrew really embody participation in prayer? Are we speaking to the most basic level of participation or are we aspiring to participation on a more substantive and spiritual level? If, as it is my sincerest hope, we are aspiring to the latter, then I believe there are far more effective

avenues of achieving this goal than by reading Hebrew. Only a few of the many alternatives include teaching prayer themes and meanings, the history and evolution of liturgy, and prayer across the denominations and throughout the world. Furthermore, not only are these avenues more effective, they are also more edifying and engaging, which are hopefully two more goals of our students' Jewish education.

While it may appear that I am staging a vendetta against the teaching of Hebrew altogether, I should reveal my identity as a devoted Hebrew enthusiast. I believe that the very language defines the story of our people – its complicated structure, ancient origin, continuous evolution and development, embedded romance, tragic memory, and impossibly complicated rules. It is my weakness for its beauty as well as compelling arguments from educators in the field that continuously force me to reconsider the merit of reading Hebrew as a skill to be transmitted in a religious school environment.

According to Professor David Zisenwine of Tel Aviv University, Hebrew is one of the central vehicles in the transmission of Jewish culture and identity. "Language," he states, "reflects the culture in which it grew and developed, and is, in fact, the central means by which we communicate ideas and nuance." It is the "de-emphasis of Hebrew language learning," he maintains, that "leads teachers to present a culture and religion which does not properly reflect the texts, culture, and practice that form the base of Jewish tradition."<sup>1</sup> Professor Zisenwine eloquently communicates a visionary goal for Hebrew education with which I wholeheartedly agree: The transmission of Jewish culture and identity. It is not the goal with which I ever differed, but rather with the means of achieving it.

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<sup>1</sup> Zisenwine, D. 1997. Teaching Hebrew: A suggestion for Hebrew educators. *Religious Education* 92:(1), 55-60.

I concede that in a day school or even a camp with an intensive Hebrew program, the ability to read Hebrew can lead to a comprehension of ideas and even the subtleties of nuance, which can subsequently lead to a greater insight into Jewish culture and the development and enrichment of one's Jewish identity. Given the time and resources necessary to adequately learn a new language, however, and the time and resource constraints characteristic of supplementary schooling, I seriously question the ability of Hebrew-reading skills acquired in religious school to yield anything more than adequate decoding skills and a scant vocabulary. Taught in this way, Hebrew in religious schools has become "a symbolic shell, at best a cursory fulfillment of Bar Mitzvah rite of passage" requirements, treated as nothing more than a "quasilect" or "psuedolect."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, if one of the greater goals of Jewish education is to transmit Jewish culture and to foster and enrich Jewish identity, is a sincere attempt to actually achieve this goal such a controversial and radical notion? Would it not be a more effective use of our limited time in supplementary school to design our curriculum for the purpose of achieving this goal, rather than designing it in spite of it? Can we still teach the wonder and beauty of Hebrew without teaching how to read it? I think it is possible. I am not claiming that Jews should not learn to read Hebrew; I do believe that the ability to read the ancient language of our people is an important part of being Jewish. I do claim, however, that we must not attempt to accomplish an impossible mission, namely, attempting to defy the principles of language acquisition. Students can and should still learn how to read Hebrew. However, they should learn in an appropriate environment that can provide them with the most effective tools and support to guide their

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<sup>2</sup> Glinert, L. 1999. Smashing the idols: Towards a needs-based method for teaching Hebrew as heritage. *Journal of Jewish Education* 65:(3), 17-20.

achievement of this goal, as opposed to an environment, such as the religious school, that sets them up for failure from the very beginning.

For years, we have focused on the question of “how.” How do we teach Hebrew effectively in a religious school? Yet, perhaps a question of “what” would be more appropriate. What environment would be an effective one in which to teach Hebrew? This should be one of the essential questions steering the direction of Jewish education. At present time, we are trying to force an impossible fit, like forcing a square peg into a round slot. In addressing the “Hebrew problem,” we have consistently tried to adapt the content to the environment; what if we attempted to adapt the environment to the content? I believe the first step in achieving such a feat is to examine the issues related to teaching any language, and then to determine whether or not a particular environment appropriately addresses those issues. I don’t think we will ever find the “perfect” environment for teaching Hebrew; I know, however, that we must rid ourselves of the mindset that there is one panacea that will cure all of what is ailing Jewish education. I believe that approaching this situation as a joint effort between the religious school and other venues of education is the most effective formula for success.

It is not the purpose of my essay, however, to propose an effective environment for Hebrew-reading education or to propose alternative ways of integrating Hebrew into the classroom; rather, my purpose is to present the following proposition: There are more effective ways to utilize the limited time in religious school than teaching students how to read Hebrew. Exciting and enriching lessons are happening all the time, as exemplified by the tale I recounted of the first class. It is my wish to define Jewish Education, not by the tale of both classes, but by the tale of that one magical class: The tale of a class that is constantly engaged, challenged, thrilled by their own curiosity and thought-provoking questions, and surprised by their level of

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insight and understanding. The tale of a class with their heads upright at attention rather than on tables, their arms in the air rather than crossed at their sides, and their eyes filled with wonder rather than glazed by boredom. Let us teach them something they will remember, that will encourage their growth and learning, and that will entice them to return to us in years to come, or better yet, never leave in the first place. Let us gain the insight and humility to recognize when something is not working and let us garner the courage and motivation to make serious and significant change. Let us learn from the tale of the first class, and transform it into the tale of Jewish education.