

Matt Kahn
January 31, 2008

THE DILEMMA OF HEBREW IN JEWISH EDUCATION

There is little disagreement these days regarding the state of Hebrew in Jewish education. The general consensus is that Hebrew education is in need of improvement. Various arguments exist which call for more time, resources, and energy to be devoted to Hebrew. In addition, there are debates as to which type of Hebrew needs to be taught, how to go about teaching it, and even if we should be teaching Hebrew at all. I believe it is essential to engage in these debates and to offer my own analysis of the issue as well as my suggestions for how best to approach it.

It is my belief that Hebrew needs to be a central component of Jewish Education and should be brought to the forefront of our debate regarding the future of Jewish education. Even more so, we need to reevaluate why we teach Hebrew and refocus our goals. Hebrew should be taught with the goal of language acquisition and eventual fluency, not simply for the sake of decoding prayers. Finally, we should be instilling a love of Hebrew in our students that drives them towards a lifelong desire to study the language.

Before delving into these issues, it is necessary to begin with a brief history of Hebrew education in America. Professor of Jewish Education at HUC-JIR Isa Aron talks about the history of Hebrew instruction in her article "Teaching Hebrew in the Congregational School." She describes how early 20th century Hebrew instruction was essentially the domain of the Talmud Torahs which were established by local Jewish communities. Modern Hebrew was a central focus of the curriculum. In Reform congregations, Hebrew was not taught at all because of the Reform movement's ideological aim at the time to eliminate Hebrew from the liturgy. As congregations began to take over the Talmud Torahs' role regarding Hebrew instruction, the total

time devoted to Hebrew declined. Subsequently, problems and challenges sprang up in Hebrew education that persist to this day.

Looking at Hebrew in a historical perspective, Alvin Schiff points out how Hebrew “is the vehicle of the sacred past, of eternal Jewish values. At the same time, it is a major expression of contemporary Jewish vitality” (160). He believes that Hebrew has played a significant role in the survival of the Jewish people throughout history. While I essentially agree with this statement, I do not believe that Hebrew is vital to the survival of the Jewish people today. We are at a point where basically the entire body of Jewish texts and literature has been translated from Hebrew. In addition, prayer books have been written almost entirely in the vernacular. We as a people could survive without the use of Hebrew. However, despite this, in all essence we simply wouldn’t be the same people. Hebrew is the language of our ancestors, the language of our past. Reading Jewish texts and praying in the language of our ancestors connects us to that past. Jewish experiences can only be sufficiently understood through the use of a distinctly Jewish language. Without that language, we would lose a sense of that past, a defining part of our identities.

In addition, Hebrew has always been the universal language of the Jews. If we lacked Hebrew, the language that binds us together as Jews no matter where we reside, we might end up disconnected and isolated from each other spiritually. Addressing this point, Gilead Moragh states that “there are many Judaisms and many variants of Jewish culture, but there is only one Jewish people. Hebrew captures this very precisely by identifying the Jews simply and clearly as *am Yisrael*, the People of Israel” (2). Hebrew is what binds us together. A Jew from France can visit a synagogue in Italy and have no trouble at all following along in services. Hebrew is a common language to all Jews. Hebrew should not be taught simply to endow students with a set

of skills. It should be taught, according to Moragh, as a language that is “a people’s most powerful means of communal integration and collective expression” (3).

Moving beyond these compelling reasons why to teach Hebrew, the debate should also focus on the end goal of Hebrew education. I believe that our goal should be nothing short of fluency among our students. Fluency with Hebrew can vastly improve the learner’s experience studying Jewish texts. Students would have the ability to grapple with Jewish texts in the original language and avoid some of the problems associated with the difficulties in translating the meaning of Hebrew into another language. In order to truly be able to work with the texts, it is best to study in the original language, as all translations are commentaries in themselves. In addition, an individual’s perspective on prayer can greatly change upon being able to not only read the prayers in Hebrew, but to be able translate what he/she is reading as the words are being said.

Another worthy goal of Hebrew education is enabling greater interest and passion towards Israel. Competency in speaking Hebrew could create a desire for students to visit Israel as well. When traveling to Israel, comprehension of the Hebrew language would allow this person to immerse him/herself more into the culture of Israel. Before visiting, s/he would already have a greater connection to the Israeli people through a common language. Knowledge and understanding of Hebrew could help facilitate conversations with local Israelis as well. In essence, Hebrew comprehension could add to a person’s experience in Israel by allowing him/her to gain a greater sense of belonging and more of a desire to return.

Acknowledging the importance of Hebrew and the goals that are indicated, the question remains then as to how best to teach it. It is clear that there is a lot that we can learn about Hebrew education from looking at systems in use in Israel. The first is the *ulpan* (intensive

Hebrew school) system, which “stresses oral comprehension, conversation, and daily terminology” (Schiff 160). An additional method is the *ivrit b’ivrit* (Hebrew through Hebrew) approach, which involves the teaching of other subjects in Hebrew. These systems have worked well in Israel with regard to new immigrants and students studying abroad there. It allows the learner to be immersed in Hebrew and can have rapid results for language acquisition, and eventual fluency.

While these systems work well within the State of Israel, we must ask whether or not such models could work well in an American setting. A major type of Hebrew education that is not utilized to much extent is Hebrew immersion. We can take the Israeli model of *ulpan* and *ivrit b’ivrit* and apply it to the discussion of immersion programs. In order to be successful at eventually attaining Hebrew fluency, we need to start teaching children at a very young age. It is at this early age where children are most capable of language acquisition. Their brains act like a sponge and in these first few formative years in their lives, learning a new language can be quite easy. I believe that if we target children in early childhood education, we can have a profound impact on their future Hebrew language fluency. Giving students a solid base of Hebrew knowledge when they are young will help encourage them to continue to study Hebrew in their high school and college years as well.

If students are to have the opportunities to study Hebrew later in their academic careers, efforts should be made to lobby for Hebrew to be added at public schools where there are large Jewish populations, which would enable Hebrew learning outside of the typical Jewish institutions. If students were given access to Hebrew instruction in other ways, there would be more opportunities to learn the language outside of the traditional framework that we have today. Currently, there is not enough time devoted to Hebrew in congregational schools. If that time is

made up for in a public school setting, the student gains from having more exposure to Hebrew education. In addition, pressure is taken off of the congregational school to be the sole provider of Hebrew education for those students who only attend congregational schools.

In order for programs such as the congregational school to be successful in teaching Hebrew fluency, we simply need better trained teachers. There is a reasonable supply of native Israeli Hebrew educators in the US. However, just because Hebrew is their first language does not make them good educators. Effort should focus on finding Israeli teachers who have been well trained pedagogically. In addition, we need better training for Israeli teachers as well as an effort to recruit and train professional Hebrew speakers who are not Israelis.

Assuming that we are able to succeed in our efforts to gain better trained teachers, we still need a system to address the concerns of our Hebrew educators as well as a system to implement widespread solutions. A particularly attractive approach has been posited by Gilead Morhag. His idea involves creating a national organization of Hebrew educators which as of right now does not yet exist. According to him,

There is a lot of real talent in the field, a lot of concern, a lot of passion...and a true willingness to work. But there is no institutional framework that would bring these people together, give them voice, and provide opportunities for defining common problems and devising collective solutions to these problems (6).

A national organization would allow Hebrew educators, who comprise the front line of Hebrew education, to help implement strategies for making the goal of Hebrew fluency a reality. This organization could be instrumental in promoting this issue on a national level and devoting the necessary resources towards it. This would be a positive first step in developing an agenda and putting that agenda into action. The only question that Morhag poses is whether we have the will to carry it out. While I currently don't see the massive support that is necessary to implement

this agenda, I am encouraged by what I have read on the subject and I believe that the desire is out there among Hebrew educators.

If all of these efforts mentioned above are fruitful, I envision many changes that will take place among our students studying Hebrew. I can see the possibility of students using Hebrew more, with words popping up in their everyday language. In addition, I imagine students bringing Hebrew phrases and words home to their families. We cannot expect students who attend religious school twice a week to become fluent in Hebrew. However, I believe that extra curricular Hebrew programs should be offered for those students and parents who wish to engage in a deeper level of instruction in Hebrew. Starting with immersion programs is a big first step in instilling a love for Hebrew in children at a very young age, which will be a catalyst for future learning. Becoming fluent in Hebrew will take a lot of time and energy, but if we have the will and the passion to carry it out, then my goal of more Hebrew fluency can someday be reached. It will be a gradual and painstaking process, but the benefits are far outweighed by the challenges.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aron, Isa. "Teaching Hebrew in the Congregational School." Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Morhag, Gilead. Journal of Jewish Education. "Hebrew: A Language of Identity." 65 no. 3. Fall/Winter 2000.

Schiff, Alvin. Journal of Jewish Communal Service. "Why Hebrew is Fundamental to Jewish Education. Vol. 75, No. 2/3. Winter/Spring 1998/1999.

Shohamy, Elana. Journal of Jewish Education. "Contextual and Pedagogical Factors for Learning and Maintaining Jewish Languages in the United States." 65 no. 3 21-9 Fall 1999/Winter 2000.

Zisenwine, David. Religious Education. "Teaching Hebrew: A Suggestion for Hebrew Educators." Winter 1997; 92, 1.