



MODERN HEBREW: CULTURE AND IDENTITY

by Lori Sagarin

“The golden key to Jewish education is the Hebrew language.” —Chaim Nachman Bialik

I can remember the exact moment I knew that I had come to own the Hebrew language. I was sitting in my childhood synagogue shortly after returning from a year in Israel when I looked up to the ארון הקודש (ark) to see the words דע לפני מי אתה עומד emblazoned above. I read it, immediately understood what the words meant, and realized in a quick second that Hebrew was now second nature to me.

Since that day in the synagogue, I have taken great pride in my Hebrew fluency. I have come to naturally link my knowledge of the language with my love of Israel, deepening

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my inherent sense of the inextricable link between the Hebrew on my lips and the Israel in my heart. My Hebrew experience connected me to Israel and Israelis in a profound way that has continued to provide meaning and joy to my life.

Language is a primary factor that binds people to people and people to places. It is used every day, enabling us to navigate and make meaning of our lives. It is the purveyor of culture through musical lyrics, theater, newspapers, literature, and more. Hebrew is more than the language of Israel—it is in many ways one of the core threads of Jewish peoplehood, connecting the Jewish people through time and space. In today's world, which can feel at one and the same time very intimate and very isolating, connection has become essential, something eagerly sought after. If some of the deepest

human connections are forged through language, then it follows that if we want to create a strong sense of Jewish belonging and peoplehood, Jews must own our shared language, Hebrew.

Visiting Israel has been assumed to be of increased importance in the Jewish community's agenda in recent years. With the success of Birthright Israel, an unprecedented number of young adults have visited Israel. At the same time, only small numbers can truly communicate because of the language barrier. The Hebrew that is prominent in contemporary Jewish life is generally linked to sacred texts or prayer, and not to real people and daily life. Despite the hours spent in Hebrew school, our young have no capacity to communicate, nor to connect to the language of the Land.

Questions and Answers

שאלות ותשובות

The role of Hebrew in Jewish identity development (see: "Israel as a Cornerstone of Jewish Identities") remains neglected terrain in Jewish education, despite what we know about the centrality of language to identity and cognitive development. We believe that a significant commitment to modern Hebrew language instruction in North America is critical to the future of the Jewish people and their link with the State of Israel.

How Can Knowledge of Hebrew Reinforce Positive Jewish Identity in North American Jews?

Culture is the lifeblood of a people and a nation. Culture is most readily

transmitted through language. Today, Jewish culture all over the world is deeply influenced by Israeli culture. It is, therefore, difficult to fully embrace Jewish culture and identity without the capacity to engage with Israeli culture in its native tongue. It would be like listening to music without the notes.

The predominant approach to Hebrew in the United States has emphasized liturgical Hebrew and, more specifically, teaching towards Bar and Bat Mitzvah. It is both a holy and, at the same time, frustrating task. Imagine sitting in a classroom in any school, year after year, trying to learn English and emerging five years later barely able to decode and doing so without comprehension. Not only is one's motivation to learn severely diminished, one's attitude towards Hebrew is irreparably damaged.

Why is the Teaching of Modern Hebrew in Supplementary Schools an Exception Rather than the Norm?

Modern Hebrew has the capacity, in a sublimely inductive way, to bring children into Jewish life and to enable them to feel intellectually and emotionally connected to our rich, ever-evolving and unique community. Hebrew is more than a prayer or a value word here and there. Hebrew is a key gateway into a deep, empowering, engaging modern and ancient culture. However, many Jews are willing to engage in Jewish life without knowing Hebrew, praying with words that they can barely decode and that are devoid of meaning for them.

Students who are products of our religious schools (and many day schools) visit Israel and quickly realize that they are unable to engage with Israelis on their own terms. The Israel

Experience, commonly described as life-altering, finds our young people ill-prepared to engage with the country and its culture on its own terms, in its own language. Learning even a small amount of Modern Hebrew tears down cultural and interpersonal barriers.

Many Jews feel that it is possible to be an engaged and committed Jew without the benefit of knowing Hebrew. One can learn the so-called language and symbols of Jewish life, and read the major texts, including modern Hebrew literature and poetry, in the vernacular and feel very much in the mainstream of Jewish life—all without having a significant grasp of modern Hebrew. However, doing so is like kissing your beloved through a veil: one is a part of but, in subtle ways, apart from. Nevertheless, as long as Jews believe they can live a rich Jewish life without Hebrew, making the case for spending time teaching modern Hebrew in congregational schools will remain a challenge. Indeed, in 1904, Solomon Schechter, the central figure in the emergence of Conservative Judaism, said that “a Jewish community that is not bilingual is a doomed community!”³

As the hours that students spend in the complementary school Jewish classroom have dramatically decreased, educators have given up on the goal of Hebrew language fluency. Instead, the current wisdom says that decoding the prayers in Hebrew without real understanding and reading their Bar/Bat Mitzvah Torah portion in Hebrew, again without understanding, constitutes success in Jewish elementary and middle school complementary education. Bar and Bat Mitzvah continues to serve as the golden carrot luring parents through the synagogue door. In some cases, if

there is time, some modern language learning is offered in Grade 7 in approximately 40% of schools. This and other factors mentioned support Leonard Fein's famous assertion that "Hebrew school is remembered by

most Jews as the place they failed to learn Hebrew,"⁴ leading to a broad sense that Hebrew school (and by association, Jewish education) is a failed enterprise.

There are important lessons we can learn from general linguistics as well as from experts in teaching Hebrew about moving from a grand vision to attainable outcomes.

Let us focus on one example. The connection between learning a new language and learners' identities has been extensively researched in the field of second language acquisition. This helps us to better understand how experiencing a new language can impact learners' views about themselves and their world.

Language Acquisition and Language Ownership

Vardit Ringvald, Middlebury College

Linguistic researcher and educator Stephan Krashan distinguishes between language learning and language acquisition. Language learning is a conscious activity while language acquisition is a subconscious act.¹ This theory believes that the role of learning core rules and structures of a language is important because this helps learners monitor the quality of their language production. The acquisition process allows the target language to be reinforced and internalized in a way that will be used spontaneously and become second nature to its users. Ideally, if language teaching is done in an environment in which learners are being instructionally scaffolded to a reasonable level, they will be freed of stress and anxiety of acquiring language and will develop a positive linguistic attitude and motivation.

Mastery of the target language: Language ownership is achieved when learners become (in their own way) independent users of the language. This spontaneous use of the language reflects a level of ownership, and how the language becomes a part of who they are. Acquiring a new language to this level of mastery is a process with many way stations, but it is attainable and often less challenging than we might presume. The important point is that the new language becomes part of one's identity in some way. Allowing this process to happen enables learners to become users of the language and make it their own.

Motivation: Scholars highlight the importance of motivation and attitude as factors in language learning and acquisition. Some learners have instrumental

motivation to study a new language—such as Hebrew learning for synagogue skills or reciting a haftorah portion. On the other hand, learners with integrative motivation acquire new language to become part of the group that uses the language as its mode of communication and expression. The learning of the language opens the doors to fully participating as members of this community.

However, even learners who begin to study a new language for instrumental motivation can develop an integrative motivation if they are helped to discover a connection between the language and a new culture. The challenge is to transform motivation from instrumental to integrative. Motivation is perceived as a factor that is controlled by the learners; we might posit the possibility that teachers of Hebrew could play an important role as motivators for motivation. They might open student filters to acquire the mastery of the new language by making it a positive learning experience that motivates them to identify themselves as part of the world of Hebrew speakers.

In order for Hebrew to become an entry point to the new culture and a tool for identity development, teachers need to pay attention to linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical factors that can support them in their efforts to enable students to acquire and master Hebrew and enrich the process of identity formation.

Elana Shohamy of Tel Aviv University suggests language plays the following roles in identity formation:

- » **Boundary maintenance:** Knowing the language means the speaker is a member of the club and naturally allied with other speakers of the language.
- » **Language as a socializer and conveyer of values and norms:** Language is rife with nuance and provides a mode for expressing societal do's and don'ts. Values are named and explained in the language. Although actions also model values, it is the description of the motivation for the act that places it fully in the values domain.
- » **Language as an emotional act:** Emotions are expressed through language and language evokes emotion in the speaker. As with values, language evokes memories and enables the speaker to name the power of those memories.²

Surprisingly, an individual's life is enhanced in diverse ways when one owns Hebrew: one feels a sense of belonging, possesses a deep and visceral understanding of Jewish values that can only be conveyed through language, and builds emotional bonds with Jewish culture and people in Israel and throughout the world.

What is the Role of Jewish Educators and Other Professionals in Making the Case for the Teaching and Learning of Modern Hebrew?

All of the above notwithstanding, we contend that not only is it possible for children in all educational settings to succeed in learning modern Hebrew, it is imperative that we succeed in this area. Success will mean that we can demonstrate rigor and seriousness of purpose in the work of Jewish education. Success will mean that students will feel a sense of deep accomplishment in their ability to master a new language. Success will mean that Jewish life and learning become an open book for students to engage in with confidence and a sense of competence. And, most importantly, success will mean that students will be intimately connected not only to the

Land of Israel, but also to the people and culture of Israel (and consequently Jewish life) on their own terms and in their own language.

What can Jewish educators do to ensure this kind of success for our learners? First and foremost, we must believe in our capacity to succeed in this area. Success might not mean complete Hebrew fluency by high school, but it does mean that teens, for example, are able to engage with their Israeli peers in simple conversations and feel pride in their accomplishments. It will also mean that teens will think they are cool because they know and understand popular Israeli music, or understand what is written on their Israeli T-shirts, or can bang out a few words in Hebrew on social media.

As Jewish educators, we can ensure that our educators (classroom teachers, camp personnel, youth workers, etc.) who are able to teach modern Hebrew are able to take advantage of the requisite professional development opportunities to become proficient Hebrew language educators and to learn to adapt materials for the needs of their learners.

We can also provide multiple frameworks for Hebrew learning in our settings. For example, at the very least, modern Hebrew should be offered as an option in the complementary school setting for eager language learners. In areas where it is possible, synagogues might be able to team up to provide this additional option. Every youth group activity and all camp settings can include modern Hebrew on a regular basis. In order to do this, teachers, youth workers, and camp personnel can be incentivized to take advantage of online Hebrew learning opportunities or other Hebrew language classes.

With advances in technology and the increased value attached to second language learning in the world of general education, the time is ripe to implement the abovementioned ideas.

Why is now a good time for Hebrew language learning? As Americans have embraced the notion that second language learning is not only possible, but valuable for themselves and for their children, and with the advent of everything from the Rosetta Stone language learning system to online language learning such as eTeacher to language inclusion elementary schools, Jewish parents may now possess an openness to the idea of their children learning Hebrew as a second language. The world has gotten smaller with the advent of technology, and all of our children have friends who come from homes where a native language other than English is spoken. For North American Jews, Hebrew could be a kind of native language, albeit for many a language they have not yet learned.

We need to embrace the notion that Hebrew can be learned, and those who must promote that agenda are the educators, parents, rabbis, and Jewish professionals who understand what Hebrew language learning can provide.

One interesting example of achievement in this field is in several suburban high schools in the greater Chicago area which offer Hebrew as one of the languages students can learn for credit. One student described her public school Hebrew class as an oasis in the non-Jewish desert of a typical American high school. She learned a lot of Hebrew, but she was also part of a Jewish community that met together once a day, five days a week. Hebrew for her and her classmates provided

identity enhancement every day of their high school career.

Jews around the world have known this for decades. The Jews of Mexico, France, South America, Great Britain, and South Africa, among others, have successfully taught modern Hebrew language to generations of students. The professionals in these countries make a commitment to modern Hebrew language learning and work to provide professional development for the faculty, provide materials, and create a culture that supports and celebrates Hebrew learning.

In recent years there has been a renaissance of programs exposing North Americans to modern Hebrew. Whether you are a student of pointillism or pixels, the dots are beginning to form a growing positive picture of modern Hebrew language learning.

So the case can indeed be made that Hebrew should be a significant part of a holistic Israel education curriculum. It is through language that we can most coherently understand a society. For many North American Jews, this significant piece of our connection to Israel is lost in translation. We are doomed to look at Israel from the outside until we possess the secret code. In this case, the code is our birthright, our heritage, and our language. We live in a polarized Jewish world, where every topic is up for debate. Hebrew can be a common symbol of commitment in a time of polarization. We as Jewish educators are responsible for making decisions that determine what our students are exposed to and where they receive their learning. We must seize this day—*carpe diem*—*Ivri Daber Ivrit!*⁵

Further Reading

Waxman, Chaim. "Language and Identity Among America's Jews." *Present and Future: Jewish Culture, Identity and Language*. Eds. Zisenwine, David and David Schers. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University School of Education, 1999. Print.

Endnotes

1. Cook, Vivian. "Krashan Hypothesis Mode of L2 Learning." Web. <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/Krashen.htm>.
2. Shohamy, Elana. "Language and the Identity of Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora." *Present and Future: Jewish Culture, Identity and Language*. Eds. Zisenwine, David and David Schers. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University School of Education, 1999. Print.
3. Mendes-Floh, Paul and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History 3rd Edition*. Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.
4. Leonard Fein's alleged famous comment.
5. This quote, translated as "Hebrew person, speak Hebrew," is attributed to Eliezer Ben Yehuda.



Lori B. Sagarin, RJE has served as the Director of Congregational Learning at Temple Beth Israel in Skokie, Illinois for 21 years. She is the former president of the National

Association of Temple Educators (NATE), and is also past president of the Chicago Association of Temple Educators. Lori and her husband, Rabbi James L. Sagarin, are co-authors of *Oseh Shalom*, published by the URJ press. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Wisconsin and received a Masters degree in Jewish Education and her honorary Doctorate in Religious Jewish Education from Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion.