



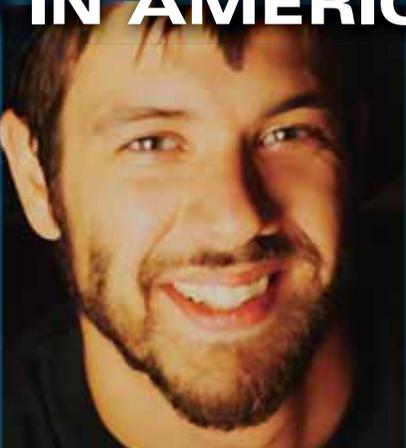
THE STEINHARDT
FOUNDATION
FOR JEWISH LIFE

CONTACT

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HEBREW IN AMERICA



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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

Photographs in this issue appear courtesy of contributors and the Hebrew Language Academy Charter School.

HEBREW IN AMERICA

On its surface, Hebrew might seem to be irrelevant to the American experience. Despite America's status as a beacon to immigrants from all parts of the world, the nation was born and persists in the English language. Even recent efforts towards bilingualism focus naturally on Spanish, the language of the country's largest contemporary immigrant population. Hebrew would seem to be peripheral to the idea of America.

And yet, from the country's earliest inception, Hebrew was an important fabric in the tapestry of American life. Plymouth Governor William Bradford studied Hebrew, noting "a longing desire to see, with my own eyes, something of that most ancient language, and holy tongue, in which the Law and oracles of God were write" (Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation*, Little, Brown, 1856). Several Ivy League schools included Hebrew in their early curricula and insignia, and there was a movement at the founding of the Republic to incorporate Hebrew language and symbols in the nascent iconography of the nation.

But in the ensuing centuries, Hebrew for the most part disappeared. American secularization, and an attenuation of interest in classical studies in general, relegated Hebrew to Jewish liturgy and study.

Might Hebrew make a comeback in American life? There are signs that offer hope to those who champion a confluence of Jewish and American values. America's enduring alliance with Israel points to a potential receptivity to the language of the Jewish State, and the incipient growth of Hebrew language charter schools illustrate the ways in which Hebrew and the American experience might intersect. Perhaps most compellingly, hundreds of thousands of American Jews have experienced Birthright Israel, and many have signaled an interest in learning Hebrew on their return. Although it is too soon to say where their interest will lead, the community would be remiss if it does not create opportunities for Hebrew education for all who wish to learn.

Articles in this issue of CONTACT explore the potential of the Hebrew language in American society. From charter schools to public schools in general to Hebrew on campus to effective pedagogies of instruction, the essays consider methods of making Hebrew more widespread in the Jewish community and beyond. Taken together, they provide a thought-provoking overview of the ways in which the Hebrew language might become more commonplace in American life — and, in turn, more potent and inspiring in the American Jewish community.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley

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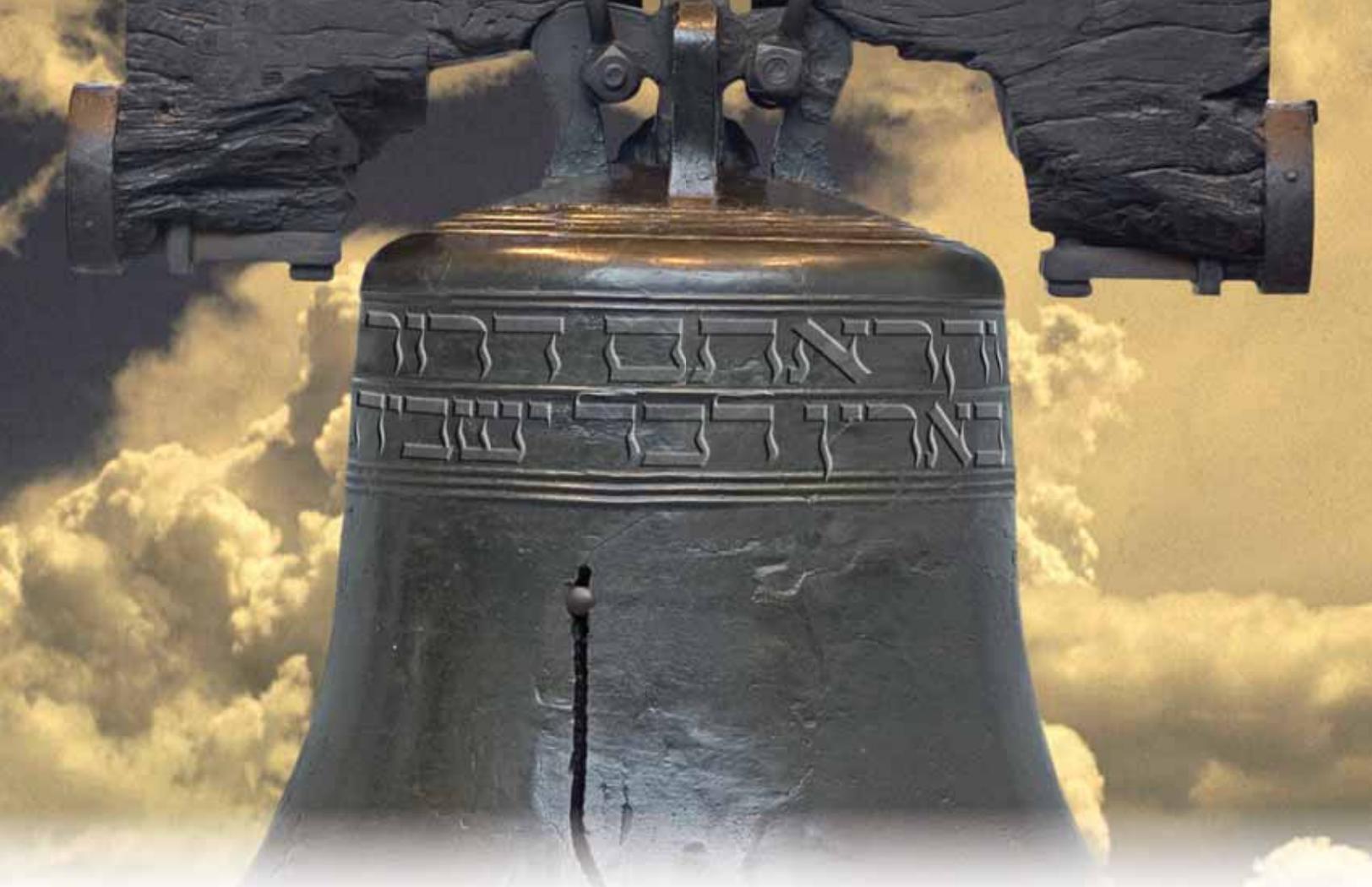
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THE POSSIBILITIES AND POTENTIAL OF HEBREW IN AMERICA

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

As Nicholas Kristof recently joked in a *New York Times* Op-Ed, while a person who speaks three languages is called trilingual and a person who speaks four languages is called quadrilingual, a person who speaks no foreign languages at all is customarily called — an American (December 29, 2010). American culture does not seem to lend itself to encouraging the acquisition of multiple languages through its educational institutions and otherwise. It should therefore come as no surprise that the Jewish educational establishment has had great difficulty in helping American Jews to master the Hebrew language. Americans do not seem to place great value on learning languages, so why should American Jews differ? Mastery of Hebrew among the vast majority of Jews in America has been limited to some facility

with decoding prayer-book Hebrew without much understanding. Even in the Orthodox community and in the overall day school world, where understanding of classic Jewish texts in their original Hebrew and Aramaic is central, fluency in modern Israeli Hebrew is far from a given.

And yet, the Hebrew language has been an essential element of the authentic Jewish experience since the Jewish People's Biblical beginnings. The fullness of Hebrew expression among the Jewish People has taken varying forms and reached different levels at different times in history. Throughout the history of the Diaspora, Jews would evolve new languages which would blend Hebrew with the language of the dominant culture in which they lived. It is difficult to know what percentage of Jews at any time could read and write Hebrew, but it is safe to assume that all who spoke Ladino and Yiddish had an intimate familiarity with choice Hebrew words and phrases.

In many ways, for much of Jewish history the Hebrew language has encapsulated the intimate particularity of the extended family that is the Jewish People. The Hebrew language is the music that expresses the aspirations, values and ways of being of the Jewish People. Like all languages, Hebrew has an historic relationship to a particular community, people or body politic. Unlike most languages, Hebrew lost its function as a spoken language as a result of the Jewish People's exile from the land of Israel. Hebrew was not used as a daily language of conversation and life, but rather was preserved only as a medium of study and prayer, written legal discourse and ritual observance. With the first stirrings of the Jewish national movement in the mid-19th Century, a new literary approach to Hebrew developed. As Zionism became centered on creating a new society in the land of Israel, a movement to reclaim Hebrew as a spoken, lived language took root.

Rabbi David Gedzelman is Executive Vice President of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

At the center of achieving a new sovereign cultural reality for the Jewish People was the renaissance and resurrection of the spoken Hebrew language. Reclaiming the language of Israel was as important to the Zionist enterprise as was reclaiming parcels of land in Israel. In a certain Zionist view, one could only fully realize oneself as a Jew if one could begin to think, dream, speak and sing primarily in Hebrew. Educational structures, especially for the very young, were created with the clear goal of birthing a new generation that would speak Hebrew as its mother tongue. The deep connection between the Hebrew language and the very place names of the land of Israel created an immediate normalcy for speaking Hebrew in

Like any other element of Jewish civilization, bringing Hebrew into the public sphere in America has the potential to bear fruit in a myriad of ways.

the land of Israel. Classic Hebrew was mined for new applications in the modern era. Modern pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax were consciously established. Words and phrases that had historically been inextricably tied to religious ideas and structures began to function in secular contexts and uses. On the one hand, the resurrection of Hebrew as a modern spoken language was miraculous; on the other hand, the process was intentional and disciplined. Creating a new Hebrew speaking society took revolutionary discipline on the part of the early pioneers. As early as the 1880s, Eliezer Ben Yehuda set out to systematically reclaim Hebrew as a spoken language. This included his personal decision to speak only Hebrew with his closest family members. In 1890, he established the Committee for the Hebrew Language. In 1900, it was renamed the Academy for the Hebrew Language as it set out to actively and officially transform and secularize Hebrew for use in the Yishuv.

Less than 100 years after Ben Yehuda began his work, modern Hebrew language emerged completely as the natural and full day-to-day medium of Israeli life and culture. It carries with it a texture that speaks at every moment of the reality of a contemporary Peoplehood, a shared sense of belonging and familial connection, while conveying a myriad of references to classic and ancient ideas, constructs and memories.

At the same time, the vast majority of

Jews in America have little fluency in the Hebrew language. At present, the Hebrew language functions more to separate Israelis from American Jews than it does to bring us together. For most American Jews, Israel remains an abstract idea. As with any culture or civilization, ignorance of its dominant language puts one in a position of distance from and inaccessibility to the texture of its life.

For Americans, a Jewish Peoplehood that connects them to the culture of Israel cannot be achieved if they remain ignorant of the basic element of that culture, the Hebrew language, which also serves as the basic element of historic Jewish civilization. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine American Jewish expressions making serious inroads in gaining legitimacy in Israeli eyes unless those expressions are made in Hebrew by Americans who can speak, write, read and understand the language. Israelis justifiably can't understand why they should respect an American rabbi's claim to Jewish legitimacy if that rabbi stumbles in Hebrew.

The good news is that the tens of thousands of young Americans who have experienced Israel through the Birthright Israel program are coming back home with a pronounced desire to learn modern Israeli Hebrew. This is unprecedented. These young Jewish Americans also have great interest in contemporary Israeli music and art, which cannot be fully appreciated without a modicum of Hebrew fluency. Also, they have grown up in an American context that assumes a multicultural enthusiasm for exploring new possibilities of identity. In other words, the sub-cultural milieu shared by highly educated, sophisticated Americans, in which most Birthright Israel participants take part, is one that is past the melting pot ethos of the last generation. It values cultural difference and experimentation. This cultural milieu is also less prone to eschewing the learning of foreign languages than are other segments of American society. In the end, Kristof's observation is not completely true of all Americans. It is certainly not true of Kristof and it is not absolutely true of that highly educated small segment of Americans in which Jewish Americans, especially the young, are disproportionately represented. They do learn languages when doing so is exciting, connecting and culturally enhancing. It just might be that this appreciation for the culturally different and exotic will help make the current generation of American Jews more open to Jewish particularism in the context of the universal in ways that we

have not seen before. The enthusiasm for learning Hebrew may benefit from this shift. That the Hebrew in which they are interested is not immediately tied to theological language and liturgical contexts, but is the contemporary language of modern, secular Israeli society, makes it that more accessible to a mostly secular, albeit spiritually searching, population.

All languages develop and change over time. The changes they exhibit reflect the cultural developments and understandings of those who speak them. If sizeable numbers of American Jews do not avail themselves of expression and understanding in the Hebrew language, then the future development of Hebrew will in no way reflect the American Jewish experience. Given the relative numbers of Israeli and American Jews and the possibilities for relationship, it is conceivable that Hebrew in the future could bear the stamp of that intimate relationship as it changes and develops.

But in the end, it is questionable whether the vast majority of American Jews, who are fully entrenched in the American open society, will embrace the Hebrew language if they continue to perceive Hebrew as parochial and inaccessible to their non-Jewish friends, co-workers and family members. Just as the Alliance Francaise movement championed the learning of the French language for all who were interested and not just those of French origin, it is time to promote Hebrew in America as the living modern language of one of America's closest allies, with both contemporary and ancient import, not just for American Jews but for everyone. Otherwise, a large segment of American Jews may not see its value. As the spoken language of a modern, economically vital and burgeoning member of the community of nations, Hebrew can be promoted as giving great added value to anyone excited to learn it, no matter what that individual's religious, communal or ethnic identity might be. Like any other element of Jewish civilization, bringing Hebrew into the public sphere in America has the potential to bear fruit in a myriad of ways. It makes it that much more attractive for American Jews to embrace Hebrew if they know that others are interested in the language as well. What's more, Hebrew in the public sphere will encourage more Americans to develop a personal appreciation for Israel, its life and culture. More than anything, though, a light of nations with a liberating message of wisdom for the world can hardly bring forth that message if its central civilizational medium, its language, remains unknown, inaccessible and foreign. The time is ripe for Hebrew in America. ■



HEBREW LANGUAGE CHARTER SCHOOLS

by SARA BERMAN

For more than three years, I have been intimately involved with the creation of Hebrew language charter schools. These are public schools that offer an immersive dual-language curriculum for children of all backgrounds. They focus on Modern Israeli Hebrew and culture while emphasizing academic excellence.

My impetus in spearheading this work has been two-fold: *Aleph*, I love the Hebrew language and want to see it accessible to a much broader range of Americans; *Beit*, I believe in the value of increasing the options and choices for excellent public education available to all parents and children. So when my family's involvement with the Areivim Philanthropic Group led me to chair a working group exploring possible projects in the area of formal education, I was excited to try to understand the potential innovations we could generate if we helped open many Hebrew charters across the country.

We started by developing an application for a Hebrew language charter school in Brooklyn, New York and simultaneously began developing a plan and proposal for supporting the development of such schools nationwide. The Hebrew Charter School Center, Areivim's first project, was born just a few months before the Hebrew Language Academy Charter School in Brooklyn opened its doors. We are moving fast and aggressively, as this is an opportunity that just can't be missed.

Our schools will teach the Hebrew lan-

guage in a way that has almost never been done before in American elementary education. Our goal is for our students to eventually be able to speak Hebrew comfortably, and to move beyond the basics of reading and writing. As public schools, Hebrew Charters must teach Hebrew without in any way encouraging the Jewish religion or, for that matter, privileging the particular identity of any one child over that of any other. This is how it should be. By teaching Hebrew in a public context that does not favor any particular identity or religion, the language is made all the more broad, universal, relevant and accessible to Americans at large.

At our schools, Hebrew is not taught in a vacuum. We use the proficiency approach and believe that languages are best learned using the authentic materials of the places in which they are spoken. The teaching of the culture, atmosphere and rhythms of life in the modern secular state of Israel goes part and parcel with teaching Modern Israeli Hebrew. Doing so in public schools also fosters an appreciation for and understanding of Israel that is much more relevant and accessible to Americans.

There are those who question whether it is possible to teach Hebrew in a public school while safeguarding the separation of Church and State. Of course, Hebrew has profound historical connections to religion, but all languages have such connections. Children from all backgrounds learn Greek without having any relationship to Greek Orthodoxy. And the same goes for Latin and Catholicism. Elements of language may have religious origins, but that does not entail their preclusion from

use in public contexts if those elements have multiple meanings and uses. For example, the term "Mission Statement" has Christian origins, but it has certainly evolved a clearly secular usage appropriate to a public context. Secular Zionism involved a deliberate and purposeful process of the secularization of the Hebrew language over a long historical period. Using Hebrew terms in a secular way in a public school is appropriate even if those terms might also have religious origins and usage. In addition, there is nothing inappropriate about carefully teaching students in a public school about the religious origins of particular Hebrew terms any more than it would be inappropriate to explain the Biblical allusion of the title of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in a public-school English class. Charter school authorizers and their legal counsels in four states understand this, as do scores of public school districts across the country that have allowed the teaching of the Hebrew language in their public schools for decades.

I often dream of what the graduates of our Hebrew language charter schools will look like 20 years from now. I see them as a vanguard of understanding for Israel and for cultural respect and sharing in general. I see them as part of a new sense of the portability of the Hebrew language outside of Israel. But the work of the Hebrew language charter school movement will be incomplete if it does not find its complement in a broader movement for bringing Hebrew to America. I look forward to finding partners who are excited to champion Hebrew in new and fresh ways. This beautiful and robust language deserves nothing less. ■

Sara Berman is Chair of both the Hebrew Language Academy Charter School in Brooklyn, New York and the Hebrew Charter School Center.



תגלית

TAGLIT-BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL AND **HEBREW:** THE ERA OF DREAMERS

by GIDI MARK and BARRY CHAZAN

A HAPPY STORY

There is consensus today that Taglit-Birthright Israel is one of the important developments of the last decade in terms of affecting Jewish identity and the connections between Israel and world Jewry. This naturally gives the founders and professionals of Birthright

Gidi Mark is the International CEO of Taglit-Birthright Israel. Before 2008, he served as the project's International Director of Marketing and Community Relations. Mr. Mark joined the project at its inception after leaving Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he served as a diplomat in New York, Germany and Turkey. Barry Chazan has been International Director of Education of Taglit-Birthright Israel since its inception. He is Professor Emeritus of Education of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and author of books and articles on Jewish education, moral education and Israel education.

Israel a feeling of gratitude. They labored diligently to create a financially viable and educationally significant enterprise, and the evidence seems to point to great success. Much success can be attributed to thoughtful planning, hard work and trial and error. But it must be said that some of the success is the result of surprises and discoveries that surfaced along the way.

One of these surprises is related to Hebrew language and culture.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

Early on and increasingly throughout the program, various sources — research, anecdotes, and program evaluation — pointed to the impact of experiencing Hebrew as a living language of a modern Jewish country

among Birthright Israel participants.

The interest in this subject is revealed by such oft-repeated but still gripping statements as “Wow, even the dogs and cats speak Hebrew,” and by the ongoing research findings of Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies that one of the most powerful take-backs of Taglit participants is the desire to study Hebrew at their universities or at an *ulpan* upon return. In short, exposure to Hebrew culture plays a much bigger role in the Taglit experience than any of us had realized.

FROM HEBREW SCHOOL TO HEBREW HAMBURGERS

What is it about coming to Israel for ten days on Taglit that turns the “unhappy”

subject of Hebrew into a new beacon for young adult Jews?

In order to answer this question, we must first ask what has been the general experience of most American young people with the Hebrew language. For some, it was Hebrew school — a supplementary school experience that has had a checkered history. For others, it was rote learning of an alphabet and word configuration in order to recite blessings and a *haftarah* at one's *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, or a holy language studied in order to read sentences in the prayer book or other Jewish texts. For still others, it was a foreign language studied at the depth of basic conversations about daily matters (weather, family, holidays). All of these are important and reflect the diverse efforts — under conditions that were not always easy — of American Jewish education to teach Hebrew.

When young adults come to Israel, they suddenly experience Hebrew as a living language of a contemporary people that is used to:

- order food in restaurants
- teach in universities
- discuss politics and theology
- buy jewelry
- begin a relationship

Whereas in the past, Hebrew has most often been connected to ritual and religion, the Taglit-Birthright Israel participant comes to Israel for ten days and suddenly sees and hears a society doing everything in Hebrew — fixing cars, praying, playing, ordering a hamburger, arguing about the meaning of life and trying to hook up with a friend or set up a date. Hebrew becomes linked to life and people. Research has made it clear that Taglit participants return with many things — closeness to Israel; a greater ability to explain Israel; a greater feeling for the linkage of Jews, Judaism and Israel; and a general heightened “Jewish feeling.”

What has not yet been studied enough — but which we believe to be true — is the conscious and sub-conscious impact of breathing “Hebrew oxygen” and hearing “Hebrew voices” — one of the most powerful experiences Israel provides. Let us be clear and honest: Taglit participants do not learn Hebrew in ten days, and this is not one of Taglit's overtly stated goals (although

today all trip organizers have realized the potential of Hebrew, and each incorporates it in its own way). But we increasingly believe participants return with some kind of a “Hebrew virus.”

WHY BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL OFFERS NEW POSSIBILITIES

Research on Americans visiting Israel either on high-school or post-high school trips emphasizes the power of the visit. However, such research also reveals one discordant note — the lack of contact with Hebrew culture and society. Samuel Heilman's 1995 study of a high-school trip emphasizes its overall power, but also notes that young people live in what the author describes as a kind of American “bubble.” Research points to disappointment among overseas college students that they had not improved their Hebrew:

The 626 students interviewed by the American Jewish Committee in the late 1980s for its study on North American Jewish students at Hebrew University's Rothberg International School (RIS) “commented that their Israeli experience could have been more rewarding if more contacts were established with Israeli students.” Hebrew University sociologist Erik Cohen found in 1993 that 83 percent of students wanted to study in Israel to improve their Hebrew skills... (Allison Good, “American And Israeli College Students: A Missed Opportunity,” *The Jewish Week*, December 28, 2010)

In its own way, Taglit-Birthright Israel remedies these problems. Participants do not spend ten days in an isolated bubble. While they are part of a group and the group is the central environment, the group is *in* Israel. It travels, sees and hears Israel firsthand. Second, and even more important, Taglit participants live with Israelis for five days or more. They may interact in English but they breathe, hear and even experiment in Modern Hebrew. Taglit-Birthright Israel is an Israel experience as well as a Hebrew experience.

What is even more surprising is the impact this seems to have on participants' consciousness. Young adults seem to understand better than others the integral connection between language and sense of self. They want to learn Hebrew because they seem to realize language is part of

identity, and mastering a language is changing one's self in some way. The culture and oxygen of Hebrew may indeed have a viral effect on Taglit participants.

FROM TEN DAYS IN ISRAEL TO A HEBREW CULTURE IN AMERICA

So what might be the takeaway and challenge from the reality we have described? When returnees say “it changed my life” or “it transformed me,” they may be referring both to what happened in the past ten days and to what could happen in the months and years ahead. Perhaps hidden in the “Taglit effect” is the awakening of a new American Hebrew culture. What if participants were to return with a desire to learn Hebrew, and we were to respond to that seriously? What if programming and activities after Taglit were to encompass a major new national Taglit Hebrew *ulpan* community that would spread across North America? What if we were to utilize the sparks that clearly have been ignited, and that the research definitively documents, to create a fire of Hebrew interest? Maybe, just maybe, we might create the new Eliezer Ben Yehudas of Hebrew in North America.

Ironically, this may be the most promising resource for a Hebrew renaissance — thousands of young adults who study Hebrew not because they *have* to in order to recite a *haftarah*, but because they *want* to because a spark has been lit. Is it possible? Without being too grandiose, over 100 years ago they laughed at Herzl when he spoke about a Jewish State. They laughed at Eliezer Ben Yehuda when he said “*Ivri, daber Ivrit*” (“Hebrew person, speak Hebrew”). Many laughed in the late 1990s when the State of Israel, Jewish philanthropists and Jewish communities said they were going to try to crack the logjam of non-travel to Israel.

Maybe Saul Tchernikovsky was right when he said, “Laugh laugh at all my dreams, I the dreamer tell you they will come true” (“Creed,” reprinted in *Selected Poems*, Jewish Education Committee, 1944). Maybe laughing at apparently big dreams is a precarious and doubtful road to take. One man at the beginning of the last century and a group of people at the end of the last century may have renewed the long-standing credibility of the Jewish people as a nation of Hebrew dreamers. ■



HEBREW: A GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN FOR JEWISH IDENTITY

by WAYNE L. FIRESTONE

The trends we are seeing on increasingly global and diverse college campuses represent an opportunity to reignite a universal connection to the language of our ancestors and of our Israeli friends and family.

While the Jewish world bemoans the increasing secularization and apathy among young Jews, Hebrew presents an opportunity for students to explore Jewish identity in their own language.

Over the past decade, the Jewish people have unwittingly launched a marketing campaign for a seemingly fledgling enterprise: Hebrew. To the best of my knowledge, this campaign has been generated without a plan or a budget, and without an organization or university devoting significant resources or energies to it. Yet from what I have seen on university campuses across the United States and around the world, I can testify that this grassroots campaign is working to engender a linguistic and cultural resuscitation of Modern Hebrew.

Wayne L. Firestone is the President of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

HEBREW ON THE QUAD

In its most crude form, college students are wearing Hebrew, quite literally, on their sleeves. Transliterations of the names of their alma maters (Duke, Stanford and Yale) and sometimes even their political candidates adorn their t-shirts and sweat-shirts as they cross the campus quads. A decade ago, personal affinities were expressed in English with catch phrases like “Shalom Y’all,” “Israel Is Real” and “Super Jew.” Now, it is commonplace to see young people expressing their affinity publicly in its Hebrew form: *Tzahal*, *Hadag Nachash* and *Magen David Adom*. The *Alef Bet* has been dusted off and is now strutting around campus.

Wearing a t-shirt certainly does not connote a deep understanding of Hebrew, but it does demonstrate that students are encountering the language and its culture at universities and in other public settings. Some are exposed to it as a study text during a



service learning trip to post-Katrina New Orleans; others encounter Hebrew texts and the ancient letters in an academic context through Judaic studies and Modern Hebrew courses. Hillel professionals in countries from Ukraine to Argentina connect with students and colleagues through Hebrew in songs, prayers and cultural celebrations, and here in the U.S., Sochnut-trained Israel Fellows use Hebrew to teach about Israeli culture. In one of these informal sessions at the University of Florida, the translating of a Meir Shalev description of the preparation of an Israeli goat-cheese sandwich even generated a campus-wide demand for the culinary creation.

Proud Jewish students are using Hebrew quotes and Hebrew names in their Facebook profiles and tweets, and Masa Israel Journey interns recruit their peers to experience the language in its homeland. In the past decade, we have seen a huge increase in the number of students visiting Ben Yehuda Street via Taglit-Birthright Israel trips, which have brought over a quarter million young Jews to Israel and continue to introduce a cultural facet of Judaism to a new generation. These students return to campus not only with newly adopted Jewish names and cool shirts they bought in the *shuk*, or market, but also as walking, talking advertisements for our people and our language.

No, this is not the poetic Hebrew of

Yehuda Amichai nor the grammatically correct language of Ben Yehuda, but rather the awkward, accented Hebrew of a foreign tongue, struggling to claim Jewish roots and to forge individual identity.

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTIC IDENTITY

Life on campus is more global and culturally diverse than ever before. Ethnic particularism and authenticity are, though I am hesitant to use these terms, “relevant” and “cool.” Current students comprise the most ethnically diverse generation to attend college, and, as such, are much more familiar with foreign cultures. Also, the number of students studying abroad has doubled in the past decade, sparking increased interest in exotic places and foreign languages. At the same time, language has become more accessible, with new technology placing language tools in the hands of curious students who tote iPads and smart phones equipped with programs like Google Translator and Babel Fish. This broader context has provided an opportunity for new exposure to Hebrew as the *shoresh*, the root, of an ancient civilization as well as a modern culture.

Ahad Ha'am recognized that Hebrew is “a language that lives not (only) in books, but in the mouths of people” (Ahad Ha'am, *The Battle of Languages*, 1906). A hundred years ago, the linguistic battle between Hebrew, Yiddish and German was viewed as a zero-sum game. Hebrew had been preserved as the ancient language of the Bible and Jewish scholarship, but it lay dormant in the mouths of its people. In Israel today, Modern Hebrew is alive and well, thriving in a new era and amidst a new culture. Yet many are disheartened by a lack of emphasis on the Hebrew language in the Diaspora, particularly in America. The trends we are seeing on increasingly global and diverse college campuses represent an opportunity to reignite a universal connection to the language of our ancestors and of our Israeli friends and family.

Perhaps the driving force behind this interest is Jewish Peoplehood, a desire for meaningful social connection to family, friends and community that extends far beyond one's local context. Inherent in that desire is a search for identity. Stu-

dents today are open and connected to the world, and they are exploring their identity and culture in entirely new ways. The increasing interest in and awareness of Hebrew presents an accessible means to connect to the Jewish people and civilization — our people's past, present and future. For some it may require spending additional time in Israel in *ulpan* classes. Others can access the language immediately through their gadgets, friends and the resources available to them on campus. In any case, we must re-imagine Hebrew's potential to spark curiosity, growth and identity building, in turn inspiring an enduring commitment to Jewish life.

ANCIENT TRADITION AND CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY

We need to recognize the Hebrew language as a valuable portal for self-exploration and Jewish identity building by encouraging students to understand the meaning behind their names, to connect to other Jews around the world, and even to delve into the mystical dimensions of *Gematria*, kabbalistic numerology. The success of such exploration certainly relies on programmatic solutions, but more importantly requires an attitudinal shift in how the Jewish community thinks about the Hebrew language and what it holds for our people: a deep connection between our ancient tradition and our contemporary expression of Jewish identity.

As someone who moved to Israel with only a very basic understanding of the language, I understand that learning and studying Hebrew is hard. Perhaps Hebrew is not the first or easiest way to engage a student in search of Jewish connection. Yet as an educator and professional, I know that often the most difficult challenges present the greatest opportunities for identity growth in our students.

Today, fortunately, we do not have to relive Ben Yehuda's struggle to create a living language. Building on his success, we can make Hebrew and its ancient letters relevant and accessible to a new generation of questioning young adults. This is the generation to champion Jewish identity, and they have tacitly lent their marketing skills to the cause. Ironically, now the emerging question is whether we can understand their language. ■

CHARTING THE COURSE: HEBREW LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

by ANNE LANSKI

“Did you really happen, or was it only a dream?”
(Rachel Bluwstein, “Perhaps,” reprinted in *Flowers of Perhaps: Selected Poems of Rahel*, Menard Press, 1994)

It really happened. I went to public high school. My favorite class was Hebrew. It was fun, not too difficult and most important, over the course of four years, it was the class in which I learned the most — about myself and the place I belonged.

Twelve years later, I was teaching Hebrew in New Trier high school, a public school in Winnetka, Illinois. Hebrew language and cultural immersion five days a week, imbedded into the everyday life of teens, was an alternate universe to afternoon Hebrew School. It was the class they looked forward to, and it was the learning that felt most personally relevant within their school day.

On the Monday morning after Yitzhak Rabin had been assassinated, students entered the classroom without their books and sat silently. Hour after hour and class after class, they entered the room, needing to be there together. At the end of the day, 200 students gathered for what ultimately became the school’s first Israel Club meeting.

THE MAPPING

In 2009, the iCenter, an organization founded by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and the Jim Joseph Foundation and devoted to the advancement of Israel education in the elementary and secondary school years, conducted a national mapping of public high schools that offer Hebrew as a foreign language option in their language curricula.

The first point to note is that there is no systematic tracking of these programs. No one has compiled a list of schools, or created a framework for teachers, or developed a set of central standards as exists for other language instruction. The programs are a scattered, uncoordinated and unexamined resource.

Through our own research, we located Hebrew programs in 30 high schools (and one junior high school) in 20 cities in more than 12 states, including California, Minnesota, Illinois, Texas, Wisconsin, New York, Ohio, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Alabama, Arizona and Connecticut.

Approximately 1,500 teens studied Modern Hebrew in public high school Hebrew programs in 2010. Nearly one-third of these students are in the greater Chicago area, where nine suburban high schools offer Hebrew as a foreign-language option.

We estimate that there are approximately 35 teachers teaching Hebrew in public high schools nationwide.

In May 2010, the iCenter conducted a workshop for public high-school Hebrew teachers from diverse communities across the country. Findings of that meeting included:

1. There had not been any previous convening of a national gathering of Hebrew teachers in public high schools. Many teachers did not realize there was a community of colleagues across the country they could tap into (with the exception of Chicago).
2. There are no standardized criteria or curricula developed specifically for public high schools. Teachers adapt textbooks written for *ulpan* use in Israel, or textbooks written for college students in the U.S. There is a lack of educational resources that are useful, current and able to inspire students.

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3. There are divergent levels of competency in Hebrew, in teaching experience and in second-language acquisition training within the teacher population. There is a lack of professional development opportunities tailored to these teachers.
4. The teachers were extremely appreciative for the opportunity to come together. They expressed willingness to be part of a community of colleagues and are truly committed to making their programs the best they can be.
5. Most students have the same Hebrew teacher for all four years of high school. Over the course of four years, teachers develop relationships with students, with parents and often with students’ siblings, a phenomenon that is unique to the public high school teacher/family relationship. This reality imbues a certain influence in these faculty members that could be used to help direct students to continue their Hebrew studies and Israel engagement.

TOWARDS A NEW HEBREW EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA

The framework we have described — Hebrew in the public high school — was a dream of some of the founding figures of contemporary American Jewish education in the early part of the last century. As we enter the second decade of the 21st Century, this dream has a chance of becoming a reality.

Teaching Hebrew in public high schools offers unique possibilities that equal or even exceed other frameworks. Most important, it offers the opportunity for young people to gather within a Hebraic and Israeli context on an almost daily basis, providing consistency and daily contact which is critical in education.

In addition, teaching Hebrew in public high schools:

- Makes Hebrew language and culture as legitimate and mainstream as all other subjects and changes its “supplementary” nature
- Creates a social group of teens within a Hebraic- and Israel-focused context, leading to positive social capital and valence
- Offers the possibility of sophisticated language teaching using 21st Century resources and assessment
- Increases the possibility of travel to a country where Hebrew is the spoken language
- Offers the opportunity for creating engaging, extra-curricular activities such as Israel clubs, and in some cases, school-wide Israel programming.

The framework for teaching Hebrew language and culture in public high schools offers the possibility of a form of teenage education that encompasses and transcends language. It might be regarded as an adaptation of the charter school principle to significant public school and suburban areas. This framework offers the potential for sophisticated language and culture teaching and learning, which would draw on the myriad of public education resources and standards of excellence, attracting populations heretofore distant from Jewish and Hebrew education.

In order to make this happen, it requires a major strategic plan and program. In addition to enhancing and expanding existing programs, there are new communities interested in having Hebrew offered in their public high schools. The strategic plan could also provide communities with consultation and useful materials for advocating to their school boards and for enhancing recruitment. What if we could turn 1,500 students into 15,000 students?

Ours is an era of looking differently inside the box to seek new solutions to perennial challenges. Hebrew language and culture in the public high school is an exciting frontier. ■

THE HEBRAIST MOMENT IN AMERICAN JEWISH CULTURE AND WHAT IT HAS TO SAY TO US TODAY

by ALAN MINTZ

The existence of an ambitious Hebrew literary culture on these shores is one of the best kept secrets of American Jewry. We know something of the Yiddish culture of the “World of our Fathers,” but when it comes to Hebrew, our focus has been on the miraculous rebirth of the language in Israel. This is indeed a miracle that deserves our admiration, but in thinking about modern Hebrew as a language owned by its new-old native land, we do a disservice to our own cultural memory as American Jews. Modern Hebrew had its own brilliant moment here before the Jewish state was established. If we hold some hope for Hebrew as a critical cultural resource for building the future of American Jewry, then it is surely important that we become aware of the existence of the literary and educational creativity that preceded our efforts and come to know its main achievements and personalities.

I am speaking of the *Tarbut Ivrit* movement, in both its educational and literary dimensions, that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century. The movement was fueled by the idealism of young people who arrived in America before World War I and were influenced by Ahad Ha'am's Hebrew-based cultural nationalism. If the territorial accomplishments of Zionism in those years were only fledgling and tentative, the accomplishments of the new Hebrew literature had already long been assured and burgeoning. In an age of dwindling religious belief and practice, Hebrew was put forward as a reenergizing axis of national renewal which, unlike territory, had the advantage of being portable and therefore suitable for becoming in America the backbone of a new cultural elite. These young Hebraists captured Jewish education and prevented it from becoming a Sunday-school religious movement, creating instead the modern Talmud Torah — and later the Hebrew colleges — with an emphasis on Hebrew, holidays, Torah, Palestine, and “customs and ceremonies.”

The Hebraists also set about to create a serious Hebrew literature that would engage some of the large themes of American history and culture. They wrote for two audiences, and in the case of both they experienced harsh disappointments. The Hebraists hoped to educate a home-grown elite of young Americans who,

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though living their lives in English, would possess a deep Hebrew cultural literacy. But the embrace of American culture proved too consuming and the writings of

their Hebraist teachers too difficult and remote. It was in Palestine that an audience for Hebrew literature was exploding; and it was to this center that the American Hebraists hope to make a vital contribution from their populous yet remote post in the Diaspora. Yet in the eyes of the dynamic literary modernism in Tel Aviv, the American Hebrew writers came across as too romantic and old fashioned, and the tales they told of bygone times in America irrelevant to the bloody national struggles unfolding in the Yishuv and Europe.

Precisely because these writers persevered in the face of these discouragements and produced a rich harvest of American Hebrew literature, their work deserves our attention and recognition. The poetic component of this literature has been the subject of my academic research over the past years and will be published by Stanford University Press this fall under the title *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry*. It will join recently published volumes by Stephen Katz (*Red, Black and Jew: New Frontiers in Hebrew Literature*, University of Texas Press, 2010) and Michael Weingrad (*American Hebrew Literature: Writing Jewish National Identity in the United States*, Syracuse University Press, 2010), and it is much to be hoped that through these efforts American Jews will get a glimpse into the Hebraist moment in their communal history.

Beyond their historical contribution, these studies have relevance for urgent issues both inside the academy and beyond. The most palpable presence of Hebrew in American universities is as a subject of foreign language instruction. As the tongue of contemporary Israel, Hebrew is certainly a foreign language; yet for the many American Jewish students who study Hebrew as a heritage language, it is much more. It is now, happily, an established tenet of foreign-language instructional theory that language and culture cannot be disentangled from one another. The ramifications for Hebrew have yet to be thoroughly explored. Hebrew is the language of Israel today; Hebrew is the language of historical Jewish civilization; and Hebrew is also a language of intense creativity on these shores over the last century. It would therefore seem unnatural and even ludicrous that American students should be studying Hebrew in America without some awareness of all that was written here in that language.

There is a vitally critical role for Hebrew in America, even if it lies in the domain not of

creative literature but of serious cultural literacy. Unfortunately, at the moment the very notion of what it means to know Hebrew is a source of great confusion in American Jewish life. With the establishment of Israel and the reported successes of the ulpan method in the middle of the previous century, the romance of oral fluency, the capacity freely to converse in Hebrew in a contemporary idiom, took hold in the American Jewish imagination. Thus the ability to speak Hebrew became the benchmark of knowing Hebrew. Making speech the only criterion for success, I would argue, has had a profoundly harmful effect. This is not because speaking Hebrew is unimportant — to the contrary! — but because speech is the specific language competence least likely to be realized in America. The expectation of oral proficiency has created a standard that, almost by definition, cannot be achieved. This one-dimensional definition of Hebrew achievement has condemned many serious American Jews to a sense of frustration and pessimism about learning the language.

There must be a general rethinking of the kind of Hebrew knowledge that is achievable and meaningful in America. This does not necessarily mean a “dumbing down” of expectations, and the current news is not all bad. Average day school graduates, for example, cannot speak Hebrew with much fluency and often have a negative self-perception in that area for this reason; yet because they have spent many years reading Hebrew texts, the passive store of knowledge they have acquired can be activated and built upon in an intensive Hebrew-speaking environment in Israel. It is much more difficult to move in the other direction — that is, from spoken Hebrew to an understanding of the sources of Judaism in Hebrew. I make this point not out of partisan sentiment but to argue that when it comes to Hebrew in America, there are more assets and infrastructure than we imagine. In the case of Jewish leaders who have not had the benefit of these intensive years of schooling, it would make sense to approach Hebrew not through its formal grammar but through the concepts and values embodied in its three-letter roots. Computer-aided instruction has a vast potential for Hebrew learners of all types that has not yet been explored.

In the end, the Hebraists may have been wrong about Hebrew being the measure of all things — this was the monomania that contributed to their eclipse — but they were surely correct in seeing Hebrew as the binding DNA of Jewish civilization. They understood the unique role of Hebrew as a bridge that spans many cleavages: between classical Judaism and the present, between religious and secular Jews, and between Israel and the Diaspora. They further understood that any Jewish society that takes place largely in translation runs the risk of floating free of its tether to Jewish authenticity. It is much to be hoped that a revived interest in Hebrew in America will provide that integrity. ■

Rx FOR HEBREW IN AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITIES

by JONATHAN PARADISE

Hebrew is alive and well in Israel. Its amazing success story is not that of a miracle but rather of historical circumstances and the dogged determination of a tiny portion of the Jewish People who were committed to its revival as a spoken language.

Hebrew in America, by contrast, presents a dismal picture. True, Hebrew language and literature are taught in a great many colleges and universities. And although enrollments of undergraduates and graduate students have declined significantly in recent years, Hebrew still ranks far above most less commonly taught languages. However, it is the place of Hebrew as a living language in our Jewish communities that needs urgent care. By “living language” I mean a language that is used for communication — even brief communications between Jews in non-ritual contexts. All too often, Hebrew is not the language that Jews choose as the medium to voice their hopes and intents to their fellow Jews. For this reason, Hebrew in America lacks the genuine *raison d'être* that would motivate both young and old to learn to speak and understand more Hebrew. In short, Hebrew as a spoken language is not necessary in the American Jewish community, and so it is in danger of withering through neglect. Jews in America are in danger of being an ethnic community devoid of its language. There is always the risk that such communities fail to survive.

Yet there is much that we can do to reverse this trend. Some of the following suggestions are easily accomplished and are already practiced in some of our communities. Others would be innovations. None of them is beyond reach.

VISUAL STIMULI

The signs on the doors in our public buildings can be bilingual. The boxes of *kipot* in synagogue lobbies can have the word *כיפות* on them. Invitations to *bar/bat mitzvah* celebrations, weddings and Federation dinners can be in English and Hebrew. The same can be true of the menus and programs.

PUBLIC SPEECH

Who can forget the moment when President Clinton concluded his eulogy of Yitzhak Rabin with the words *שלום חבר*? It became a bumper sticker and a source of *נחת*. We need to encourage Israeli consuls and ambassadors to devote 30 seconds or so

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to briefly greet us in Hebrew, as Ben Gurion used to do. They must be told not to be ashamed to speak to us in Hebrew, and they should not repeat their words in an English translation — just as the Rabbis of an earlier generation did not translate the Yiddish quips or jokes in their sermons.

The *bar mitzvah* or *bat mitzvah* should be encouraged to prepare some brief remarks in Hebrew, and the Rabbi should speak a few sentences to the child in Hebrew. Again, no translation. When a Hebrew-speaking couple stands under the *חופה* during their wedding and hears the Rabbi speak to them personally in Hebrew, it sends a powerful message to all present. Hebrew is our intimate, Jewish language.

It should go without saying that Rabbis and other public speakers should use the Israeli mode of accentuation so that those who have learned some Hebrew in school will be able to easily identify the words. Rabbis should be told that they are not perceived as more authentic when they use the Ashkenazi pronunciation.

PUBLIC RECOGNITION FOR HEBREW ACHIEVEMENT

We can publicly celebrate the learning of Hebrew by awarding prizes and certificates. Just as some synagogues give out the “golden *kippah* award” or a silver *yad* for torah readers, we can give suitable awards to those who have achieved milestones in their acquisition of the Hebrew language.

SPECIAL EVENTS

We could declare that at the *קידוש* or *עונג שבת* after the services we will address one another using our Hebrew names and greet each other in Hebrew. How about a dance for teens where we talk as much Hebrew as possible? A Hebrew skit night? All of these activities used to be common in many Jewish summer camps.

SUMMER CAMPS

I spent many happy summers in Camp Ramah and Habonim Camps and had friends who went to Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute. Many of my friends acquired their Hebrew fluency in those camps. It seems to me that we can and should encourage these wonderful institutions to restore and revitalize the Hebrew content in their camps. Summer camps are ideal settings for creating models of what our communities can become. It is here that Hebrew songs, dances, dramatic presentations and debate can flourish and build our future community leaders' knowledge of Hebrew.

HEBREW IN THE HOME

Here is where the deepest attachment to the Hebrew language can be established and

nurtured. Parents can train their children to address them as *אבא* and *אמא*. Grandparents can be referred to as *סבא יצחק* and *סבתא רחל*. “Tomorrow *דודה טליה* is coming for a visit.” Simple phrases like *טוב בוקר טוב* and *לילה טוב*, Hebrew lullabies and other songs go a long way towards creating a Jewish home. Some families may decide to just ask for foods to be passed in Hebrew while the rest of the table talk is in English — “*חלב בבקשה*.”

One of my favorite suggestions is “Hebrew for Dogs!” For years our family had a series of dogs, each of them trained in Hebrew. All of our children's friends knew the Hebrew dog commands, for that was the only way to restrain them!

Finally, there may be some couples that decide to make Hebrew their exclusive household language. That is an ambitious undertaking, but one that some young parents are opting for (including the rabbi of my congregation, Beth El in Minneapolis). They should be supported and celebrated.

HEBREW IN THE SCHOOLS

Why should it be surprising that one often hears “kids hate Hebrew school”? Children spend many years laboriously sounding out syllables that have little or no meaning. They are made to read texts that are often not age-appropriate. They gradually learn that it does not matter if they understand what they are “reading” (of course this is not real reading!). What is important is that they pronounce the words correctly and at an acceptable pace. They learn to shut off their brains and not seek meaning as they trudge endlessly through the syllables.

But there is another method of learning a language. It is a method that uses a simplified spelling system — the one used throughout Israeli life. It is a method that teaches children to read words and sentences that already have come to have meaning for them — just as was the case when they learned to read English. It is a method of learning Hebrew that emphasizes a communicative approach to language learning, so that learning Hebrew is both meaningful and rewarding. It is a method that places understanding and speaking ahead of reading and writing. And finally, it is a method that makes use of everything that has been learned about teaching and learning languages.

Making Hebrew our Jewish language in America will not be achieved through a miracle. It will come about only as the result of determined, deliberate and planned efforts. ■



HEBREW: A LANGUAGE REBORN

by JOEL M. HOFFMAN

EXILE

The Jewish exile at the hands of the Romans in the year 70 drove the Jews out of Jerusalem and nearly drove Hebrew out of the Jews.

Hebrew had been the combined spoken, written and holy language of the Jewish People for a millennium. And though it was already in danger of decline by the year 70, the exile was the nail in the proverbial coffin that seemingly sealed the fate of spoken Hebrew.

Aramaic, already popular around the time of the exile, largely replaced Hebrew, becoming not only the Jewish *lingua franca* but, later, the language of the Talmud.

As they spread around the world, Jews picked up various local dialects: Arabic in Northern Africa; Arabic and Spanish on the Iberian Peninsula; German in Ashkenaz (modern-day Germany); French, Russian and more. Two of these, in particular, proved so popular that even as Jews continued to migrate, they took with them their new linguistic apparatus. The post-Crusade German from Ashkenaz (with other influences) became Yiddish, and the Spanish from 15th-Century Spain became Ladino.

Even a century and a half ago, Jews generally spoke a local language as well as either Yiddish or Ladino. Hebrew was primarily a holy tongue, the language of Torah and prayer and, to a lesser extent, a medium of high art. But there was no significant established community using Hebrew as the language of daily discourse, and no reason to think that — after nearly 2,000 years of disuse — Hebrew would ever regain that role in Jewish life. Hebrew, like Latin, was largely assumed to be a language of the past.

THE PATH TO REBIRTH IN ISRAEL

Into this context a man named Eliezer Yitzhak Perelman was born in January, 1858. His life would take him from the village of his birth in Lithuania to Palestine, and his ideas would put him at the forefront of a modern miracle.

Known better by his assumed name of Eliezer Ben Yehuda (Eliezer “son of Judah”), he proposed the then-absurd idea that Hebrew should be revived as a spoken language of daily,

secular life. His ideas, published at age 21, earned him the scorn and mockery of the Jewish intellectual giants of the day and the charge of sacrilege from religious leaders. But Ben Yehuda plowed forward, undaunted. Perhaps because of his conflict with Eastern European Jewish religious leaders, Ben Yehuda generally opted for Sephardi Hebrew pronunciation over the Yiddish-sounding Ashkenazi dialect as he worked to reinvent Hebrew.

Ben Yehuda and his wife forced spoken Hebrew upon their son, Itamar, who was born in 1882 and a few years later became the first native speaker of Modern Hebrew.

Other native speakers soon followed. The first Hebrew-speaking kindergarten in the world was opened in 1898 in the secular city of Rishon Le-Zion (“First to Zion”) in Palestine. It complemented Yiddish-speaking schools in more religious settlements like Petah Tikva (“Portal of Hope,” a reference from the Book of Hosea, where the phrase represents the redemption of Israel). The model in Rishon Le-Zion proved successful, and by 1913 Palestine was home to more than five dozen Hebrew-speaking institutions. Only a university was lacking.

So as the German-oriented *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden* (Benefit Society for German Jews) was completing the construction of a university to be called the Technikum, many people wanted Hebrew to be the language of instruction. After all, French had all but disappeared from the educational scene in Palestine, despite Baron de Rothschild’s enormous financial influence. Certainly German could be replaced by Hebrew, too.

The Technikum’s *Kuratorium* (board of trustees) disagreed, however, insisting instead on German.

In February 1914, just as construction on the Technikum was coming to an end, the American members of the *Kuratorium* switched sides in the language debate and opted for Hebrew over German. In response, the founders of the *Hilfsverein* resigned and even tried to scuttle the whole project. But it was too late. Though the school remained closed during World War I, when the doors finally opened in 1924, the institution had assumed a Hebrew name: the Technion. And the language of instruction was Hebrew.

THE PATH TO REBIRTH IN AMERICA

Two decades before Eliezer Ben Yehuda’s birth, a woman named Rebecca Gratz looked around her home city of Philadelphia and lamented the “mental impoverishment” of the Jews. A prominent voice in her community, she responded by

founding the country’s first Jewish Sunday School. Gratz was addressing both the lack of religious education and the general paucity of secular education at the time. Until the middle of the 19th Century, education in America was generally available only to the wealthy.

At first, Hebrew was nowhere to be found. In a break with traditional Jewish learning, Gratz’s school used English as its language of instruction. Like many German Jews of the time, Gratz eschewed the particularistic elements in Judaism, including a private language. Gratz’s approach gave Jews a pathway to Jewish learning that didn’t demand that they give up their secular lives, but it came at the expense of Hebrew, which wouldn’t be introduced until years later and with only limited success.

Gratz’s model of schooling endured and was ultimately mimicked on a wide scale, producing the now ubiquitous synagogue-based Hebrew Schools. (The public-education movement in America hindered the establishment of Jewish day schools, which didn’t become mainstream until the middle of the 20th Century.)

How did Hebrew enter the field? In an endearing *quid-pro-quo*, the Hebrew-speaking movement in Israel (which had been bolstered by the Americans on the Technion’s *Kuratorium*) fostered an eventual love of Hebrew in America. As Zionism grew, thanks in part to American leaders such as Louis Brandeis, so did the Hebrew language in America. Hebrew schools and, later, day schools, became the vessels through which most American Jews were exposed to Hebrew.

Americans generally continued to learn the familiar European Ashkenazi dialect of Hebrew. It would take the Six Day War in 1967, which almost destroyed the fledgling state of Israel, to push American Hebrew into alignment with the Hebrew spoken in Israel. But even with this reinforced cultural connection, few Americans learned to speak Hebrew, instead by and large relegating the language to the realm of liturgy.

THE LIVING LANGUAGE OF HEBREW

Today, Modern Hebrew has become the national language of the Jewish State, the language of Noble laureates in literature and of teenagers text-messaging.

Indeed, the Hebrew most people thought to be dead was really just dormant, waiting patiently to surprise the world as part of a modern-day miracle that the Israeli songwriter Naomi Shemer compared to “thousands of shining suns.” In living proof of her words, of course, Shemer wrote in Hebrew. ■

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STATE OF THE FIELD: HEBREW TEACHING AND LEARNING

by ARNEE R. WINSHALL

Is the state of Hebrew teaching and learning in the United States where it should be? Are student outcomes meeting our expectations? Many educators and consumers of Jewish education believe we have a long way to go. Professionalizing Hebrew-language educators is crucial if we are to succeed at raising the bar and improving outcomes.

In education, the growth of a field depends on a dynamic interaction between the experiences of researchers and practitioners. This interaction is key to defining and pushing the boundaries of the profession. In fact, each element that characterizes a field is dependent on such interaction:

- Standards for professionals, including certification protocols and academic degrees, are promulgated. This results when institutions of higher education foster research and, in the case of education, develop teacher-education programs based not only on theories but also on knowledge gained from research into teacher practice, learner outcomes and the relationship between the two.
- At least one active and recognized professional organization exists to serve the interests of a significant percentage of professionals in the field. Such an organization provides the context for the interaction between researchers and practitioners in which research and field experience are shared, challenges and successes are discussed and an agenda is set to move the field forward.
- Conferences are convened regularly to share expertise, research and issues facing the field. The regularity of these conferences is important as it sets the pace at which the field develops and helps to keep the field dynamic.
- A range of publications and materials on the research and best practices in the discipline are published and disseminated.
- Standards are established for student

achievement that are agreed upon by a professionally recognized body, are based on research and the collection and analysis of large data samples and are widely used.

These, too, are the result of the interchange between researchers and practitioners as to what student outcomes are possible.

So how does the field of Hebrew-language acquisition, teaching and learning in the United States measure up?

There are very few degree-granting graduate programs in the teaching of Hebrew in North America, and the enrollment in these programs is minimal (e.g. Brandeis University, the University of Maryland). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) offers certification in student assessment for proficiency in most languages, including Hebrew. At The Shoolman Graduate School of Jewish Education at Hebrew College, there are Certification Programs for teachers of NETA (for grades 7-12). There are other programs such as the Masters in Jewish Education at Gratz College, where a few courses focus on teaching Hebrew but no track exists for becoming a Hebrew-language teacher in particular. This is indicative of the state of the field: teaching Judaic subjects is lumped together with teaching Hebrew, and the teachers are expected to do both whether or not they have received adequate training.

There are few experts and little to no research focused on advancing the field of Hebrew teaching and learning, promoting an understanding of the discipline and assisting in the professional growth needs of practitioners.

Currently, the only professional organization in existence is the National Association of Professors of Hebrew (NAPH). NAPH is comprised of professors and instructors who specialize primarily in the grammar and literature of ancient, medieval and modern Hebrew. Unfortunately, the expertise required for the teaching of literature is not distinguished from that which is necessary for teaching a language. As a result, very few of the members focus on the area of Hebrew teaching and learning, and, in any case, their work does not focus on professionals working in pre-kindergarten through high school education.

In addition, dialogue among and between practitioners and academics is largely absent. There is no forum in which the creators of current curricula can share their insights and interact with researchers and others working in professional development. Instead, a competi-

tive, non-collaborative spirit infuses their work.

Assessment, where it even exists in the ready-made Hebrew curricula, currently measures whether students have learned items specific to the given curriculum, but does not necessarily measure a student's proficiency. Very few of our Hebrew-language educators are equipped with reliable, standardized and benchmarked student-assessment tools. Less than two dozen educators in the United States have been certified in Hebrew-language proficiency by the ACTFL, and less than half a dozen are certified as trainers.

We must move away from our reliance on a curriculum-based approach, which assumes that the teacher is not a professional but an agent in the classroom who is incapable or ill-equipped to take responsibility for Hebrew teaching. Instead, we must develop programs that prepare Hebrew-language teachers who are well-versed in and familiar with learning resources and who have the expertise and authority to make teaching and learning decisions for their students and their schools.

While some of these criteria are partially satisfied within the world of academia and institutions of higher learning, there is virtually no professional field when applied to Hebrew teaching and learning in early childhood through grade 12. Outside of the work associated with Dr. Vardit Ringvald and *Hebrew at the Center* in professional development and assessment and professional development and certification associated with specific curricula, there is little evidence that the above criteria are being satisfied for Hebrew teaching and learning.

The funding community has reinforced this situation by investing millions of dollars in the development of ready-made curricula without requiring and funding significant assessment and research into what works and why. Some commitment of funders to Hebrew has been demonstrated, albeit not enough.

The challenge is to leverage such investment and interest in order to realize the goal of creating, advancing and perpetuating a professional field that will, in turn, promote mastery among teachers and spur the highest levels of student performance. The professionalization of Hebrew-language teaching and learning should be characterized by experts convening to question the current status of the discipline; discuss issues of concern; collaborate to advance teacher performance, recruitment and retention; and ensure the highest levels of student proficiency in the Hebrew language. ■

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Webster's *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines pedagogy as "the function or work of a teacher, the art or science of teaching, and instructional method." (Barnes and Noble, 1996) This popular source weighs its definition of pedagogy toward the more mechanical aspects of teaching.

The field of second language education views pedagogy in similar ways. In their *Teacher's Handbook*, Judith Shrun and Eileen Gilson refer to pedagogy as "teaching methods" or "classroom activities" (Heinle, 2009), and Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg call it "classroom applications" (*Languages and Children*, Pearson, 2010). Others, such as Timothy Regan and Terry Osborn, label a teacher's actions within the classroom "classroom strategies" (*The Foreign Language Educator in Society*, LEA, 2002).

Common to the above definitions are references to the mechanical aspects of the profession, about which teachers tend to be principally concerned. Language teachers are apt to view their lessons through the lens of their classroom activities, becoming anxious and insecure when their list of activities is insufficiently rich. In my experience as a teacher trainer, I have witnessed time and again how teachers become impatient in professional development sessions when they are not presented with enough ideas for activities that they can immediately apply in upcoming lessons.

This concern has translated itself into an enormous market for educational companies that sell readymade materials for classroom activities, in addition to the myriad of books and websites serving a similar function. The field is literally flooded with resources available to all language teachers in every area, including second-language acquisition.

Resources for second-language pedagogy include two types of teaching activities. The first emerged as a result of research derived from disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, education and neurology. The famous Audio Lingual Method (ALM), for example, is based on research into the behaviorist model that explains learning as the relationship between stimuli and response; the Grammar Translation method relies on Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar; James J. Asher's Total Physical Response method (TPR) uses studies about the brain; and the Krashen Monitor Theory has inspired practitioners to find ways of creating an anxiety-free learning environment which provides comprehensible input to its learners, teaches the language in a specific order and encourages students to monitor their language development. The second type of resources are those created by experienced, successful practitioners, using their intuition and creativity.

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THE ROLE OF SECOND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

by VARDIT RINGVALD

The best learning pedagogy can emerge only when the language educator is adequately equipped.

While the challenge of finding sources for activities is now easily met, it remains for us to empower our teachers with the expertise to identify the best and most suitable activities and to use them wisely in their classrooms. Well-chosen and aptly executed classroom activities will maximize the learner's efforts to achieve language goals faster and better. If we further enhance our teachers' abilities, coaching them to develop their own tools and pedagogy, they will succeed in catering their activities specifically to their learners' needs.

What we have learned, however, is that language educators can develop the above skills only when they are functioning within the appropriate professional environment. Donald Freeman articulated three different models for the language-teaching profession (D. Freeman, in R. Ellis, "SLA and Language Pedagogy," Cambridge University Press, 1997).

The first and most commonly adopted model in Jewish education today is called "teaching as doing." This approach reflects the behavioral view, which requires teachers to master a prescribed set of behaviors along with a set of actions. In this context, the underlying assumption is that a teacher's learned behavior can lead to the desired student outcome. This behavioral approach fits when teachers are viewed as the operators who implement a readymade curriculum in which the materials and classroom activities have been dictated by the creators of the curriculum. This is the approach preferred by teachers and institutions that do not want to undertake the responsibility of investing in designing a curriculum or teaching a pedagogy of their own. Adopting this stance, however, will not lead to results in which language learning is maximized. Language acquisition is a dynamic process influenced by the many variables of learners and learning contexts that result in learners progressing in the language at different rates. Teachers need to constantly modify learning materials and classroom actions in order to meet the different needs of their learners. In the behavioral view of the profession, allowance is not made for such accommodation.

In order to make use of the right pedagogies,

the field needs to embrace the other two ideal framework models defined by Freeman for fostering the growth of second-language educators. The second model outlined by Freeman perceives language teaching as a "cognition." This approach requires teachers not only to become experts in the available canon of teaching activities but also to be knowledgeable about the research that supports them. This research relates to both second-language development and to learner variables, such as learner's age, motivation, learning style, strategy, other language learning experiences and so on. Such knowledge can help teachers select the most appropriate classroom activities for their learners and also transform the teachers so that they consider themselves able to access infinite resources to create their own classroom activities. When a teacher understands these theories, he/she can also understand the rationales behind methodologies and thus make educated decisions about which methodology to use and when, all the while accommodating learners with the process that will be most effective in helping them to make progress and to retain the target language. Such a teacher would use this understanding of the research to create original activities that reflect language-acquisition processes.

Freeman's third model, which should also be adopted by the profession, views teaching as "interpretive." This model recognizes the fact that not all learning environments are similar. Because each educational setting has its own characteristics and demands, teachers need to rely not only on their knowledge about the needs of their learners, but also on how the particular conditions of the learning environment can impact learning. These conditions may include the school's mission, the number of contact hours, the number of students in the classroom and many other aspects of a given environment, which must be interpreted in order to make expert adjustments to the language curriculum and to the classroom activities.

The best classroom activity:

1. is language level appropriate
2. is age appropriate
3. is research based
4. is relatively easy to implement
5. has a measurable outcome
6. fits the appropriate part of the lesson
7. fits the language skill that it aims to reinforce
8. can serve students with diverse learning styles.

As we contemplate the best ways to teach Hebrew in our schools, we should note that the best learning pedagogy can emerge only when the language educator is adequately equipped. When teachers are knowledgeable about the theories of second-language acquisition, aware of learner variables and responsive to learning conditions and environments, they will be able to reflect on their practices and modify their activities, either during or after the lesson, in order to make the right decisions as they choose or create the most effective pedagogies in support of the language acquisition process. ■

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I often dream of what the graduates of our Hebrew language charter schools will look like 20 years from now. I see them as a vanguard of understanding for Israel and for cultural respect and sharing in general. I see them as part of a new sense of the portability of the Hebrew language outside of Israel. But the work of the Hebrew language charter school movement will be incomplete if it does not find its complement in a broader movement for bringing Hebrew to America.

— SARA BERMAN