



Purposes and Practices of Israel/Hebrew Education: Towards a Joint Agenda for Applied Research

A Research Brief for the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education

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Hebrew Education and Israel Education: Linking Disparate Fields

Questions surrounding the roles of Hebrew and Israel in Jewish education are not new to American Jewry, and are most compelling at those historical junctures in which Jewish educators and their institutions have reflected on the precepts and purposes of the Jewish educational enterprise. This research brief takes a closer look at the relationship between the fields of Hebrew language education and Israel education, and offers preliminary ideas for a joint research agenda that informs the work of researchers, practitioners, and philanthropists committed to improving teaching and learning of and about Hebrew and Israel. We begin this process by asking, “Why does Hebrew education matter for Israel education?”

Many educators and scholars view Hebrew and Israel as “intimately and inextricably intertwined” (Katzew, 2011), yet opinions on how that is or should be so in Jewish education run the gamut from hope to despair (e.g., Chazan, 2004; Sagarin, 2011). On the whole, educators tend to view Hebrew as a “significant piece of the puzzle” of how to improve Israel education in North America (Horowitz, 2012); however, what that puzzle should look like and how it should be pieced together is not yet clear.

In schools, camps, and afterschool programs, many educators use Hebrew to reinforce or promote learning about Israel (Grant and Kopelowitz, 2012, p. 37). Hebrew thus becomes a vehicle for teaching not only how to speak or read, but also how to understand Israeli literature, politics, history, and culture. In fact, in many educational settings, students learn about Israel not primarily through “Israel education” programs but through Hebrew language curricula (Pomson, Deitcher, & Rose, 2009). If Hebrew language education can support the goals of Israel education, then the reverse also appears to be true. There is some evidence that Israel experience programs that specifically promote Hebrew learning can dramatically increase students’ language proficiency even as they introduce participants to the culture and geography of Israel (Sinoff, 2008). When taken with the fact that in many schools, the Hebrew language teachers—often Israelis—are often also responsible for teaching about Israel or the Zionist vision of the school (Buckman, 2008), Hebrew emerges as a “natural” place for integration with Israel education.

However, though it garners a lot of attention, the relationship between these two central pillars of Jewish education is undertheorized and lacking empirical data. There is little known about what variety of Hebrew is taught in different settings, who the teachers are and how they are trained, what materials are being used and how effective they are, how much time is being spent on Hebrew instruction and Israel education across educational settings, what levels of competence learners achieve, or what role learning Hebrew has in forming learners’ attitudes towards and connections to Israel, and how this varies by language variety, educational setting, or religious denomination.

To address these gaps, and to engender more productive discussions about the relationships between Hebrew and Israel in Jewish education, we propose a research program that asks, “***How do the purposes and practices of Hebrew education shape, and how are they shaped by, the purposes and practices of Israel education?***” This bidirectional line of inquiry encourages scholars and practitioners to highlight both

the contributions and potential challenges of Hebrew to Israel education, as well as those of Israel education to Hebrew education. This question also recognizes that there is a spectrum of ways in which educators and students conceive of and learn about Hebrew, Israel, and their roles in Jewish education. Any research agenda in Hebrew and Israel education (separately or together) must not only cut across educational settings, denominational affiliations, and research methodologies, but must also grapple with the multiple meanings, purposes, and educational approaches to Hebrew and Israel.

In defining this broad-based research question, we challenge conversations about Hebrew and Israel education that assume that Hebrew language instruction contributes to a stronger identification with Israel. This idea—one commonly held but for which there is scant research support—must be empirically examined by researchers. Yet, a robust research agenda cannot be limited to this question alone. Instead, by highlighting the bidirectional nature of the relationship between Hebrew education and Israel education, and by giving equal weight to both sides of the equation, we call for a research agenda in Jewish education that recognizes the multiple ways that Hebrew education and Israel education intersect. For this reason, we use the term Hebrew language education, rather than Hebrew language-learning, to call attention to the broader institutional and cultural forces at play in the process of educating Jewish Americans in Hebrew. By using this term, we highlight multiple dimensions of Hebrew language education, including language learning but also encompassing teaching, curriculum design, and teacher professional development.

In the remainder of this brief, we lay out a framework to guide scholars, practitioners, and philanthropists in their collaborative efforts to define a joint research agenda in the fields of Israel and Hebrew education. The framework hinges on the idea that neither Hebrew nor Israel is a unitary term signifying a clear referent; instead, each is a variegated construct that is understood and enacted by users in a variety of ways. To this end, we frame three dialectics that highlight the multifaceted nature of Hebrew and of Israel, both in historical and contemporary Jewish life and in Jewish education.

Three Dialectics of Hebrew/Israel Education

Discussions about Hebrew education often elide any serious consideration of the complexity of the language. Often, we speak of “Hebrew,” when in fact we should be speaking about “*Hebrews*,” a plural construction that recognizes that the language has evolved and been shaped by language contact forces as well as the geographic dispersion of its speakers over time. Hence, the conflation of the numerous varieties—Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, and Modern—into one umbrella term runs the risk of minimizing the differences between varieties and glosses over what the specific language learning goals are. By speaking of *Hebrews*, we put questions about the modes (i.e., written and spoken) and varieties of Hebrew texts front and center, and by doing so, are able to expand the category of Hebrew educators to include individuals and institutions involved in the teaching and learning of any Hebrew text.

So, too, is Israel education a study of multiple *Israels*: Israel of the Bible and Israel of the modern nation-state; Israel as a Jewish country and Israel as a home to all of its citizens; Israel *shel maalah* (of spirituality) and Israel *shel matah* (of reality); a homogeneous Israel of the Jewish people, and a heterogeneous Israel of many Judaisms, multiple religions, and different classes of citizenship. Each of these Israels—whether depicted in Jewish liturgy, Zionist ideology, Jewish history, contemporary politics, or many world religions—can be highlighted or downplayed in different educational settings.

In recognition of the complexity of these constructs, we frame discussions of a joint research agenda as one structured by three dialectics:

- Sacred/profane
- Unifier/divider
- Center/periphery

In the pages that follow, we examine these dialectics to highlight how Hebrew and Israel—over time and across space and place—occupy different roles in Jewish life and Jewish education. Our purpose in clustering these beliefs is not to prioritize one over another, nor to suggest clearly delineated boundaries. Rather, this framework allows us to put front and center the complexities surrounding teaching, learning, and living in connection with Israel and Hebrew. By highlighting the shifting and multi-faceted space that Hebrew(s) and Israel(s) have occupied in Jewish life and Jewish education, we hope to guide an applied research agenda that can more accurately reflect, and more meaningfully shape, these two fields.

Hebrew & Israel as sacred / profane

To many, the centrality of Hebrew in Jewish education is not surprising given its status as the sacred language of Judaism. Jewish religious observance is steeped in language practices and tends to demand highly marked and self-conscious use of linguistic resources, including when, how, and by whom prayers are recited, the ways in which prayer books and other sacred documents are handled and valued, and the reliance on Scripture and commentary to define Jewish practice (Benor, 2012; Boyarin, 1993; Fader, 2001; Heilman, 1987).

Hebrew as sacred (read: Biblical) underscores traditional forms of Jewish education that focus on studying sacred texts, whose commentary also require knowledge in Mishnaic and Medieval Hebrew varieties (as well as Aramaic). Additionally, this ideology shapes debates regarding the use of translation in Jewish religious practice (Avni, 2012) and influences what variety of Hebrew is taught in Jewish educational settings. The social implications of this ideology are worth considering, for while many Jewish Americans may have limited proficiency (beyond decoding) in reading liturgical texts, the linguistic practices of American Jews have been exceptional in that knowledge of the Hebrew language and its alphabet has remained a dominant and crucial feature of religious identity. For American Jews who define their Jewishness in terms of religious observance, Hebrew is a proxy for one's Jewish identity. In regards to interactions with Hebrew sacred written texts, this identifying work reminds us that a lot of "Hebrew education" happens in contexts surrounding the study of biblical and liturgical texts.

Conversely, Modern Hebrew, as a language of daily communication, occupies a place in Jewish education outside of the synagogue and in the contemporary language classroom. Approaches to Hebrew instruction that espouse Hebrew's position as a non-sacred language approximate those of other national languages, and discussions of best practices center on incorporating foreign language instructional methodologies that lead to both oral and written proficiency (Shimon & Peerless, 2007; Nahir, 1981).

Israel, like Hebrew, can be imbued with both sacred and profane meanings. Historically significant sites, such as the Western Wall, the tomb of Rachel, and various other archeological findings, acquire religious importance for the way they evince Jewish connection to the land. Likewise, as a sacred place for Islam and Christianity, Israel becomes a contested palimpsest of religious history and identity, wherein conflict makes the land all the more sacred. For American Jews, then, Israel is often taught on a symbolic level, grounded not in contemporary social realities, but in American beliefs of "Zion as it ought to be" (Sarna, 1996). In this approach to Israel education, Israel matters not as a thriving modern state or hub of contemporary Jewish culture, but as the "sacred lodestone for the Jewish people" (Grant, 2008). Israel becomes important to teach precisely because—historically and today—it is a place of religious importance for the Jewish people.

Yet Israel is not only a center for Jewish religion and spirituality; it is also a place of quotidian life, cultural heritage, and politics, and holds religious and cultural significance for many non-Jews as well. In recent years, scholars and educators have increasingly pushed for a more nuanced approach to Israel that allows learners to explore its complex reality, not only its sacred, symbolic status for the Jewish people (e.g., Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Gringras, 2008; Geffen, 2008). This "profane" Israel—an Israel of ethnic and religious

conflict, modern development, and economic hardship—becomes not a place stuck in time, and thus viable only to the imagination, but a country like any other.

A research agenda that explores Hebrew and Israel as both sacred and profane would examine the different ways the land, people, and state of Israel and their language have manifested as symbolic and enacted representations of Jewish life. By highlighting how Hebrew and Israel—solo and in concert—have been a source of religious meaning and secular culture, a joint program in applied research would reveal the ways that Jews across time, geographic location, and denominational and political affiliations have found meaning in different forms of Hebrew and Israel.

Hebrew & Israel as unifier / divider

Throughout history, the teaching of Hebrew has been motivated by a central belief in the role of Hebrew as the principal means of linking Jews to each other. While other languages (e.g., Ladino, Aramaic, Yiddish, and English) have been and are of major importance for the Jewish people at specific times in history, Hebrew has fulfilled a central role in communal integration and collective expression (Spolsky & Benor, 2006). Indeed, Hebrew is often considered the linguistic glue that binds Jews together, despite differences in ethnicity, nationality, religiosity, and traditions. Ironically, it is language—ever changing and evolving—that is often called upon to guarantee cohesion and continuity.

Yet, Hebrew can also play a divisive role, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Whether as a marker of ethnic authenticity (Kattan, 2009) or of denomination and devotion (Wisse, 1992), Hebrew, like other languages, can fortify symbolic boundaries among subgroups and individuals. Indeed, when viewed as the language of Israel, rather than of the Jews, Hebrew becomes not a tool for unification, but a means of differentiation, division, and suppression. Hebrew's role in the creation of an Israeli identity has also been divisive, being the driving force in eliminating Jewish languages other than Hebrew from daily use. Hebrew language curricula in Jewish educational settings rarely, if ever, touch upon Hebrew's divisive potential, and a research agenda that aimed to understand Hebrew's role in contemporary Jewish education would address this gap.

Israel, like Hebrew, plays a unifying role in the Jewish imagination. It unites as the historical homeland of the Jewish people and as a place to which all Jews are, at least in theory, welcome to immigrate. Much like Hebrew language, connection to Israel is often thought of as a marker of Jewish identity, and as such is frequently taught not for its own sake but as a proxy for a larger, widely embraced educational goal: the cultivation of Jewish identity.

Yet while classical Zionist ideology positions Israel as the home of all Jews, a thriving Jewish culture in North America and Israel's support of these communities belie Zionism's mission of *kibbutz galuyot* (ingathering of exiles). Israel's role in contemporary Jewish life, and its contested political reality, also make it a divisive topic. There has been a flurry of writing in both the popular and academic Jewish presses focused on concerns of a growing divide between older American Jews and a younger, more liberal, generation that is increasingly skeptical of or ambivalent towards Israel (e.g., Luntz, 2003; Cohen & Kelman, 2007; Cohen & Wertheimer, 2006; Beinart, 2012). Not only is public discourse about Israel divisive, but Israel's role in the classroom is often highly contested, sometimes leading to mistrust and distance from the very students Jewish educators are hoping to reach through their Israel programs (Pomson, 2012; Zakai, 2011).

A research agenda that explores Israel's and Hebrew's roles as unifiers and dividers would offer a more expansive understanding of their respective roles in Jewish life and Jewish education. It would account for peripheral voices in Israel and for the ways in which American Jews feel not only about Hebrew, but about other Jewish languages and their role in constructing a contemporary or historical Jewish diasporic identity. Such an approach would also open up opportunities for thinking about the teaching of Hebrew not in terms of competency (i.e., what a person can or cannot do with a language), but in terms of performativity (i.e.,

what the language does for the speaker in terms of identity construction). Research and pedagogy that account for both Hebrew's and Israel's divisive potential, in addition to the ways that they unite different communities of Jews, would go far in promoting a more robust debate on—not to mention, would more accurately reflect—contemporary American Jewry's multifaceted relationships with Israel and Hebrew.

Hebrew & Israel as center / periphery

The role of Hebrew in Jewish life also occupies various positions along a spectrum with Hebrew as center on one end, and Hebrew as one of many diaspora languages on the other. The former ideology can trace its ontology to the Hebraists – predominantly secular Hebrew scholars and writers – who arrived in North America from Eastern Europe during the 19th century. Although Modern Hebrew did not become the living language of American Jewry, Hebraism did have a significant impact on Jewish education in America throughout the 1900s, and particularly how and where Hebrew was taught. For example, the Hebraist movement spearheaded the introduction of Hebrew immersion (*ivrit b'ivrit*) in Jewish afternoon schools (Krasner, 2011) and summer camps. The ideology that Modern Hebrew is a “portable homeland” (Mintz, 1993, p. 14) that can create and sustain a vibrant Jewish cultural center, not necessarily dependent on religious or national identity, remains influential.

On the other hand, through the centuries, Hebrew has also often been seen as one of a number of Jewish languages, playing a role, and not necessarily the central one, in the linguistic landscape of the Jewish Diaspora. For example, Yiddish was the language of daily communication in Eastern Europe, while Hebrew was purely liturgical, literary, and used exclusively by males. In contemporary Hasidic communities and schools, Yiddish and Hebrew continue to occupy the spheres they once occupied in the Hasidic communities of Eastern Europe (Fader, 2009; Schick, 2010). Other American Jews have embraced Yiddish as well, establishing a wide network of secular Yiddish camps and schools throughout Canada and the United States (Freidenreich, 2010).

Israel has also been positioned both as the center of Jewish culture and one of many Jewish communities. Classical Zionism, for example, saw all diasporic manifestations of Jewish culture as inauthentic and peripheral, and the Israeli state held similar ideologies until the mid-1990s (Gold, 2002). Many Jewish educational institutions continue to teach this classical Zionist approach to Israel (Isaacs, 2011). Yet, both in Jewish thought and Jewish education, there have been challenges to positioning Israel at the center of Jewish existence (Aviv & Shneer, 2005). Dubnow's autonomism, for example, saw dispersion as the natural state of Jewish experience, and Israel / Palestine thus as *a*, rather than *the*, center of Jewish cultural production (Dubnow, 1958). More recent thinkers have gone so far as to suggest that America—not Israel—is the true “promised land” for Jews (e.g., Neusner, 1989). Translated to education, this view suggests a “peoplehood model” in which Israel is “conceptualized as one of many possible frameworks of collective Jewish identity” (Isaacs, 2011). North American Jewish educational institutions, and even the Jewish Agency for Israel, have begun to adopt an approach that views Israel as an important, but one of many Jewish communities (Kopelowitz, 2003).

Hebrew and Israel's place at the center or within a fluid space of Jewish experience has significant repercussions for Hebrew education, Israel education, and the relationship between the two. A research agenda that explores Israel and Hebrew as being both at the center and the periphery of American Jewish identity would seek to understand the diversity of beliefs and approaches to teaching about Jewish communities and Jewish languages. It would also examine the ways that Hebrew and Israel can and do provide a central anchor in the construction of contemporary Jewish identity.

Envisioning a Joint Research Agenda in Hebrew/Israel Education

Considering the scope and breadth of Israel education and Hebrew education in the United States; the varied settings—both formal and informal—in which education in these subjects takes place; and the gaps in our knowledge about approaches, practices, and outcomes in Hebrew and Israel education, no one piece of research can cover all that we need to know. We therefore envision a set of projects that, taken together, can fill in the blanks in our knowledge of the relationship among Hebrew education, Israel education, and Jewish education; the practices used in these educational programs; and the results they achieve separately and in tandem. Such a research program must (1) collect basic data about the state of Hebrew and Israel education, (2) articulate the aims and purposes of these educative missions, (3) analyze the practices of educators and learners, and (4) assess the outcomes of educational programs.

Any research in these areas must cut across a variety of educational settings—including day schools, supplementary schools, camps and other youth programs, adult education programs, and Israel experience trips—and a wide range of denominational and political affiliations. In attempting to create a more holistic and multidimensional understanding of what Hebrew education and Israel education are and can be, applied research must also employ a variety of methodological approaches including qualitative, quantitative, historical, and action research.

In what follows, we pose a series of questions for researchers, practitioners, and funders to consider as they collaborate to develop a program of research that will be informative and meaningful. While not intended to be an exhaustive list, the research questions we pose cut across setting, affiliation, and methodology. They also draw upon the belief that Hebrew and Israel are both variegated: secular and profane, unifying and dividing, central and peripheral.

Basic data

As a first and crucial step, researchers must collect basic data about educators and learners, their competence in Hebrew and knowledge about Israel, and their attitudes towards the language, the country, and its people. Key questions in this area include:

- What is the demographic map of educators and learners of Hebrew and Israel education in the United States? Demographic information should include denominational affiliation, religiosity, educational setting, educational history, settings in which Hebrew is learned, length of study of Hebrew, geographic information, standard sociodemographic information and competency levels.
- What are the attitudes towards Hebrew and Israel of these different demographic groups?
- What is the relationship between Hebrew language learning and what people believe about and how they act toward Israel?
- What are students' and educators' views about the relationships among Hebrew, other Jewish languages, and Israel?

Aims and Purposes

Scholars must also articulate the aims and purposes of Hebrew education, Israel education, and the integration of these heretofore separate bodies of research and practice. Key questions in this area include:

- What are the aims and purposes of Hebrew education and Israel education? When and how do they overlap?
- How do educational rationales guide institutions' decisionmaking regarding the variety (or varieties) of Hebrew being taught?

- How have these aims and purposes evolved over time and across settings and denominations?
- What beliefs, systems, and pedagogical approaches have educators developed to connect the teaching of Hebrew and the teaching of Israel?

Practices

It is also paramount that researchers analyze the day-to-day practices of Hebrew education and Israel education and their overlap and separation, including curriculum development and implementation, pedagogical strategies, professional development, and in-school and out-of-school interactions. Key questions in this area include:

- How does the teaching of Hebrew and Israel in various educational settings reflect, reproduce, and/or reconstruct particular conceptions of Jewish identity?
- What are the day-to-day practices through which learners and educators manifest their beliefs and attitudes about and towards Israel, Hebrew, and Judaism, both in and out of the classroom?
- How do curricular materials, educational approaches, and teacher training practices reflect and define institutions' rationales for teaching Hebrew?
- How are educators who teach different varieties of Hebrew trained to teach about Israel, and how are Israel educators trained to incorporate Hebrew language into their teaching?
- What are the multiple ways—within and across settings—that educators, learners, and educational materials account for a diversity of thought on Israel and Hebrew, and their respective roles in Jewish life (including different versions of Hebrew and Israel and peripheral Israeli and Jewish voices)?

Outcomes

Finally, we must assess the outcomes of the varied approaches to Hebrew instruction and Israel education in their various settings. Key questions in this area include:

- What is the relationship among knowledge of Hebrew, knowledge of Israel, and connection or affiliation to Israel?
- How are successful outcomes in Hebrew education and Israel education defined, and how can they be measured?
- What are successful models and best practices for integrating the teaching of Hebrew language and the teaching of Israel?
- How does the space that Israel and Hebrew receive in the curriculum (frequency, quantity, type, etc.) both impact and reflect the ways learners view their roles in American Jewish life?

Together, these questions frame a research agenda that will advance our understanding of the relationships among Hebrew education, Israel education, and Jewish life in America. These lines of inquiry bring together theory, practice, and policy, and explicitly recognize the complexity of teaching Hebrew and Israel across time, space, and setting. These two fields—previously viewed as separate in both theory and practice—can each be enhanced by a joint agenda in applied research. For only a more empirically-grounded and nuanced examination of these fields and their relationship will allow researchers, educators, and funders to collaborate in their joint efforts to improve American Jewish education.

This research brief offers a theoretical and practical framework for placing in conversation these two heretofore distinct areas of Jewish education. Better understanding of how the purposes and practices of Hebrew education shape, and are shaped by the purposes and practices of Israel education, can offer an important lens for exploring the most pressing challenges in contemporary Jewish education.

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