

How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions

20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

A New Tense for Hebrew: Past, Present and *Possible*

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Unambiguous Origins

Gideon Hausner was a man before he became a day school. But there is an intelligent, engaged, compassionate and caring eye to the outside world that both Hausners share. Naturally and perhaps even unconsciously, Hausner the school seems to channel Hausner the man.

Mr. Hausner's biography and life commitments align powerfully with the school's philosophy and priorities. Born in 1915 in Lemberg, Poland, Hausner moved to Tel Aviv in 1927. He served in the *Hagana*, studied philosophy at Hebrew University, and later studied law at the Jerusalem Law School. He would become Attorney General of the State of Israel, and in 1961, at the age of 46, Hausner served as the leading prosecutor at the Eichmann trial, through which he made a public statement to the entire world about Israel, Jews, and humanity. He was the chairman of the council of Yad Vashem. And of course, there was also the family connection: Hausner was a relative to Evelyn Hausner Lauder, the mother-in-law of one of the parents and supporters of the school.

A love of Israel and the Hebrew language have been existential values rooted deeply in the school's philosophical foundation. Hausner the school also bears a firm commitment to Israel, a passion for critical thinking, and has developed a trademark pride in striving for excellence at whatever one sets out to do, from academics to social action. In September 2003, there was, therefore, nothing arbitrary about the board of directors' unanimous approval to change the name of the school from Mid-Peninsula Community Day School to Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School. However, even such clear and unambiguous philosophical commitments cannot root a school forever. Sociological and demographic realities shift. By 2007, over two decades after the school was founded in 1989, Hausner the school faced a serious challenge to its Hebrew education.

Hebrew Past: The Heat is On

Hebrew has always featured prominently both in Hausner's hallways and philosophy, though this did not render it impervious to the typical pressures and challenges of Jewish day schools. Limited to roughly the same number of hours in a week as their colleagues in public and secular private schools, day school leaders must manage an additional and complex academic agenda,

a dual curriculum of Jewish and general studies. As one feature film once put it, "sometimes something's gotta give." So why not let that be Hebrew language learning in the middle school?

At least this was the proposal that several influential parents strongly urged Julie Smith, Head of School at the time, to implement in 2007–2008, immediately after her arrival to lead Hausner. The proposal to cut Hebrew from the middle school came not despite, but alongside that firmly established philosophical commitment to Hebrew. But much had changed since late 1989 when the school first started with 36 children and was using space at the JCC of Palo Alto. No longer just a K–5 school, as was the original intention, Hausner was now a thriving K–8 elementary and middle school hovering around 400 students, complete with a waiting list and its own beautiful multi-million dollar building and campus. So it was with a sense of established confidence that these parents suggested dropping Hebrew instruction from 8th grade, specifically in favor of offering Spanish. Their thinking was that once students had become *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, they no longer needed Hebrew.

This *bar/bat mitzvah* rationale indicated these parents' assumption that Hebrew education was exclusively for the purpose of liturgical knowledge and synagogue skills. Implicit in this thinking was that post-*b'nai mitzvah* students no longer needed to learn (or maybe even to engage in) *tefillah*. But these tacit messages were not Head of School Smith's main concern. Most alarming to her was the bigger picture. Smith read this vociferous pushback from a contingent of the school's stakeholders as a clear need for improvement in the overall Hebrew program rather than a time for concessions. Smith recalls thinking,

I just couldn't imagine that. We would never say, 'I'm not happy with the math program, so let's let go of math.' Why would we do that with Hebrew? We would never reduce the standards for Jewish or general studies; we would strive to maintain a high academic quality across the dual curriculum. I don't believe in making decisions from a place of weakness, and removing Hebrew from the middle school curriculum would have been just that. So I took this heat on Hebrew as a challenge to *improve* the Hebrew program. This rejection of Hebrew was an indication that it was ailing. I resolved that we were going to continue to teach Hebrew, and we understood the heat as a challenge and indication that we needed to ramp it up.

If Hebrew was to be taught at Hausner, Smith figured, it should be done at that same high level of thoughtful and creative educational excellence that she strives for in other areas of general or Jewish studies. Change came not despite, but precisely because of, pressure or “heat” from parents. The heat became the catalyst for investing time and energy to improve, and even to excel.

Staff did address the Spanish interest as well, by offering it as an elective in middle school. Although the elective program is for fun, creative, not typically academic topics, they indicated that if students wished, they could use that time to study Spanish. About a third of the class chose to take Spanish, and on average, about 12–15 students opt for it each year.

If there had been a sense that dissatisfied murmurings about Hebrew were bubbling below the surface before, the discontent was no longer veiled. Now explicit and direct, Smith took this opportunity to respond from a position of leadership. She needed someone who could develop a vision and blaze a patient path through the heat. She would find this partner in Noam Silverman, whom she hired as principal of Hebrew and Jewish studies one year later, in the summer of 2008.

Silverman still recalls vividly an illuminating experience he had while leading his first Friday morning parent meeting. After a presentation in which he highlighted Hebrew (Smith instructed him to do so), a parent came up to him afterwards to inform Silverman in an unapologetic but respectful tone, “I just want you to know, Rav Noam, this is an amazing school, but the reason we’re here is not for the Hebrew.” Silverman further reflects,

When I first arrived, it wasn’t the case that Hebrew was part of a non-threatening community. The teaching was not always as strong as it could be. At times there was a *bala-gan* [mess] with classroom management, and in general not a high enough level of professionalism. This was especially true in the middle school, which lacked direction. Most of the classes were using a dated program that sought to teach Hebrew through Jewish life and ritual. It hardly made for engaging topics for that age. We were hearing from some students that things felt unstructured and chaotic. Hebrew was perceived as a subject that was less important.

A doctoral candidate in the philosophy of education at Stanford with experience teaching Jewish studies and fluent in

Hebrew, Silverman was a perfect fit in so many ways. At the same time, Silverman himself emphasizes how he was missing at least one crucial constellation of skills and knowledge: he lacked experience with teaching Hebrew, teaching second languages, and had no administrative leadership experience in supervising faculty. Silverman began reading up on Hebrew language acquisition and invited in local professionals in the field of Hebrew language instruction, such as Hausner parent Kara Sanchez, a second language specialist and Spanish instructor at Stanford.

It was precisely an opportunity to make a genuine difference that attracted Silverman to work with Smith at Hausner. He knew Smith was not interested in a “yes-man” or in sweeping issues under the proverbial rug. And they certainly had their work cut out for them. In 1989, Hebrew instruction had initially begun at five days a week like Jewish studies. At some point before her arrival, though, Smith recounts that the school’s leadership had decided to go down to four days a week. They had been using a curricular program called *Madregot*, or “steps.” Then, in 2005, under the leadership of Silverman’s immediate predecessor, Aviv Monarch, a radical change was made quite quickly. A stellar Jewish studies teacher, Monarch agreed to take on the role of principal of Hebrew and Jewish studies solely on an interim basis, just until someone else could be found.

Monarch gave Eti Zehavi, the Hebrew coordinator at the time, full reign to move the elementary school to TaL AM, an immersive and comprehensive Hebrew language arts and Judaic studies curriculum. It would prove to be a positive change overall, but it initially ignited more heat, this time among teachers. Without a formal change process, there was not yet broad buy-in from the rest of the Hebrew faculty, who were still very invested in many aspects of the Madregot program. Learning to use TaL AM,¹ and use it well, is a massive task that requires on-site training and a serious time investment. Moreover, from a TaL AM perspective, even 50-minute sessions five days a week are paltry. This was the picture of Hebrew that Smith and Silverman inherited. “We hadn’t articulated what the goals of our Hebrew language program were,” Smith concluded.

¹ For more information about TaL AM, see www.talam.org.

Silverman agrees, adding, “Yes, but we’re at a disadvantage for Hebrew. It is harder because we’ve had decades of teaching Hebrew in this country without clear purpose or rationale and largely ignoring the changing needs and interests of the American Jewish community. It has always been easier with Jewish studies. Hebrew has been stunted.” The heat on Hebrew became a pivotal moment of truth in the life and soul of a 16-year-old Hausner Day School, which was on a clear course of high expectations for itself, *across* the academic curriculum, Hebrew included.

Hebrew Present: A Bold Foray

The first thing Smith sought to do with the state of Hebrew was promote it. Counter-intuitively, *raising* the profile of Hebrew became a necessary precondition, or at least co-condition, for achieving strides in Hebrew education at Hausner. In other words, the leaders featured Hebrew in the school’s culture *in order* to improve the program, rather than improving the program in order to later be able to highlight Hebrew in the culture of the school. For example, Hebrew was and continues to be featured at open houses with parents. Leaders have also tried to publicize Hebrew studies through an evening program called “*Erev Ivrit* on Dizengoff Street,” and through a Hebrew “American Idol” program. “We try to make these community events come to life, and those events have permeated the culture,” Smith relates. It is clear that advancing the Hebrew program has been achieved by bringing more, not less, attention to Hebrew, endorsing it unapologetically at key moments in the public life of the school. Smith continues to *market* (Smith’s word) the importance of Hebrew consciously and is experiencing significant success with raising the profile and status of Hebrew at Hausner.

Silverman entirely agrees with this approach. For him, publicizing Hebrew is not just some haphazard hope; there is a perceptive social-psychological insight at its foundation. At the very beginning of his first year, he asked Hebrew teachers to send home weekly write-ups of what they covered in class; this was a small change that made Hebrew more visible. In his characteristically modest and understated manner, Silverman delivers the potent observation, “Remember, fewer than a third of our parents have a Jewish day school educational

background, themselves.” Recognizing that the whole idea of a Jewish day school can still feel very experimental and foreign to most liberal Jewish parents has led Silverman and his colleagues to realize a need for basic education around the value of Hebrew. The goal is to dispel misapprehensions about the role of Hebrew education, and also to improve Hebrew education where perceptions are accurate that the curriculum is ailing.

Now five years into a gradual change process marked by what Silverman calls informal “fits and starts,” Smith reports, “the heat on Hebrew has been reduced to a simmer, but a simmer nonetheless.” In typical Hausner fashion, the school’s leaders still feel they have much room in which to grow with the Hebrew program. However, the changes made thus far reveal significant progress. This growth appears most evident in three major and related areas: 1) in the Hebrew teaching itself, 2) in changing parent and student perceptions, and 3) in the rationales people give for teaching the Hebrew language.

Increased Instructional Time

This year, Silverman implemented a bold and concrete change that had been in the works for some time, but without the right program or faculty buy-in, he was not ready to move forward until now: “We’re changing the schedule, now moving Hebrew back to five days a week for the first time this year, and we should be able to benchmark some changes we see this year. We are beginning with 1st grade and will expand to 2nd grade next year, and so on.” So they felt ready this year, and the 1st grade Hebrew teacher feels like she won the lottery, experiencing that extra session a week as an educational windfall. “Do you know what I can do with that extra hour?” she says excitedly, adding, “And I always missed them on that day they didn’t come. Now I get to see them every day just like the general and Jewish studies teachers do.”

One important factor that allowed for this significant increase in Hebrew instruction time was indirect. When Smith first arrived, the administrative structure included a Head of School who oversaw a Head of the Lower School and a Head of the Middle School. Smith observed that in this arrangement, the lower and middle schools functioned virtually as two separate schools with little to no contact or

communication between them. So she shifted the organizational structure by creating a principal of Hebrew and Jewish studies and a principal of general studies, each of whom oversees both the lower and middle schools. The goal was to render Hausner a single K–8 school and alleviate the strict separation. Although Smith had not thought about it at the time, Silverman observes that the structural shift probably also served to address Hebrew, by eliminating the problem of two entirely separate Hebrew programs whose teachers did not coordinate about curriculum or teaching. Finally, the role of Hebrew coordinator was also eliminated, so now one person oversees both Hebrew and Jewish studies for the whole school, kindergarten through 8th grade. It is still not a perfect model, Smith and Silverman explain, since Silverman is not a Hebrew specialist, and the portfolio is likely too big for a single position. In keeping with the Hausner ethos of continuous improvement, it is a work in progress.

The TaL AM Hebrew Program: A Strong Foundation but an Uneasy Fit

The other source of heat that Silverman appears to have addressed very successfully is the faculty's transitional pains to TaL AM. He noticed right away how dissimilar the tone, culture, and pedagogical approach of TaL AM is from the way Jewish studies are taught at Hausner, with its prevalent use of project based learning. With the benefit of his broad cross-department perspective, Silverman can observe,

In Jewish studies, it's not like TaL AM where there is a strictly structured textbook and curriculum that is carefully prescribed and sometimes feels artificial. It's so unlike JS or Hausner in general, where we emphasize organic, natural, authentic connections and processes. We don't have a lot of "color in the lines" here, that's certainly not how we do art. It's counter-cultural to Hausner's identity, which is more about flow. Even "Everyday Math" is set up with alternatives where the worksheets ask you to think differently, not just fill in blanks. Here, authentic work and relationships with teachers are what matter.

So Silverman worked with the Hebrew teachers, helping them to manage a tricky balance between exercising the freedom to maintain their own unique teaching styles even as they allow

TaL AM to be the base. He tells them, "It's the foundation for what we're doing, but don't forget you're the teacher and put yourself in it. That's what the kids respond to." The essence of this message is captured best by his adage, "I tell them, 'they need to learn TaL AM, and then to start forgetting it.' And our Hebrew teachers don't just end up adding water to a prescribed recipe, they add their whole souls."

Hausner's Hebrew Faculty

Hebrew teachers bring their Israeli souls to their classrooms. Most Hebrew teachers in America are Israeli-born and female, and most feel an intense love of their language. This has been true for at least half a century and will likely continue to be the demographic reality for the foreseeable future. These educators have left Israel for various reasons, but virtually every one of them will tell you about a common passion: to bring their beloved home and native language to American kids. Indeed, all the Hebrew teachers at Hausner are Israeli women who completed teaching programs in Israel. But Hausner's Hebrew teachers also bear a deep and uncommon compassion for just how hard it is for some American kids to learn a second language.

This understanding of the sheer psychological and emotional barriers to learning Hebrew proves invaluable and translates to a Hebrew classroom culture filled with mutual respect and good will. When teaching and learning frustrations surface frequently, when students cannot learn something fast enough or well enough, teachers are not personally offended. They do not interpret their students' lack of progress as a rejection of themselves, of Israel, Hebrew, or the Jewish heritage; even when sometimes it may well be a rejection of all four. That is not the point. The point is a positive presupposition these teachers bring that students are investing sincere effort. Assuming negative intentions would lead to toxic classroom cultures marked by paranoia and resentment, rather than collaboration and understanding. In the face of student resistance and pushback against the subject overall, while not relinquishing their goals, teachers respond with sensitive compassion and a broader social psychological perspective, just as good math teachers do when students push back against learning math, which can also be a hard language to learn. In this way, Hausner's teachers strive for realistic expectations not just academically, but sociologically. As a 6th grade

Hebrew teacher put it, “I know my students are trying so hard, and I see the effort it takes them. So I see my job as trying to help them forget how hard it is for them.” She trusts that they want to learn, and the students tend to respond accordingly, seeing her understanding of their challenge is genuine. Hebrew teachers at Hausner exhibit this caring and even loving attitude towards all their students, regardless of level.

Results So Far

The results in Hebrew instruction and for the role of Hebrew in the culture overall can be so stellar that faculty and parents alike describe them as “magic.” For example, Atara Moalem enchants parents who join the K–3 classes who gather together for *havdalah* on Monday mornings. Dressed in flowing blues that shimmer when she moves, Atara’s teaching conjures not magic, but meaning. Officially a Jewish studies teacher, Atara, Israeli-born, cannot help but teach Hebrew roots as well. Today, she features the deceptively simple Hebrew word “*ben*.” Suddenly she yanks a willing little boy from the front row and scoops him warmly into her arms, using him as a visual aid. “What does ‘*ben*’ mean?” she asks the room, full of cross-legged students and teachers, along with parents in chairs along the perimeter. With knowing chuckles, Atara continues hugging Ben (that’s his name), “*Ben* means between, between this and that, and the difference between...uh-oh! The difference between what? What are we comparing on *havdalah*?” “*Kodesh!*” they yell out. “What is *kodesh*?” she asks her fully gripped audience. “Holy,” they call out together, as if at a concert, playing eagerly with Atara, their Hebrew rock star, who happens to be a big fan of teaching Hebrew through Total Physical Response (TPR).

Atara concludes by comparing *kodesh* — that which is separate, different, distinct, unique — with sand, *chol*, the regular, normal, routine, day-to-day stuff. So what will we do to show *kodesh*? They join her in flashing her hands, blinking with her fingers to show *kodesh* and sing the *havdalah* blessings using Debbie Friedman’s tune, with their own TPR twists. Finally, upon singing “*shavua tov*,” everyone in the room turns to their neighbors to greet them warmly and joyously with hearty handshakes. It has been just eight minutes, and the school week has officially begun.

Particularly in the primary grades of the lower school, this is the “magic” associated with Hebrew. Up until 4th grade, learning Hebrew seems to come naturally and effortlessly. On a day when the letter *lamed* is learned in kindergarten, for example, Allen jumps up and down ecstatically, declaring “*B’shem ani shtayim alef!!!*” [“In name I [have] two alefs!!!”] He had formed a full sentence spontaneously and was able to communicate his own personal thought effectively, even if not grammatically perfectly. But this, after all, is how humans learn language. And the primary grade Hebrew teachers strive precisely for this genuine, authentic, spontaneous thinking in Hebrew in order to communicate one’s own real thoughts and ideas.

First grade Hebrew teacher, Dalit, eloquently describes the feeling of teaching Hebrew successfully:

Oh, that’s the best feeling in the world. You’re not teaching the program, you’re teaching the kids. It’s the sense of adventure that does it for me; you can’t just plug in the same handouts each year. No way. It takes intuition and talent, responsiveness, looking at my kids, really watching my students, feeling the vibe in the room, feeling them all the time. Being present, and being able to see, “Oh, this is not going to work,” and knowing you need to adjust and quick. And have a plan B – you always need a plan B. You have to over plan and stay flexible, look at kids and respond. For example, after lunch, if they’re tired or it’s hot, you have to be able to say, “Okay, books away, 10 jumping jacks...!” And boom, then they’re awake! Now we can learn. You have to love what you do and be passionate. If you are not excited about it, you can’t do it, and you better find something else to do.

While for some children Hebrew learning is a joy throughout, for others it is a struggle from the beginning. By 4th grade, when the curriculum takes a grammatical leap, the focus on natural speech wanes, and this pure Hebrew joy can begin to falter. Silverman wonders if this is related to the curricular materials or to the fact that language learning becomes more demanding at this stage. Smith and Silverman are working on ways of extending the magic of Hebrew beyond 3rd grade. But what does persist throughout all nine grades of the school is the Hebrew teachers’ stance of sensitivity and compassion towards all students. This compassion extends also to the students who

are hearing Hebrew spoken at home because one or both of their parents is Israeli. While one might assume these kids could coast on autopilot with all the Hebrew exposure they receive at home, some actually face academic challenges of their own.

A Twist: Native Speakers Make Hebrew “Cool”

Despite the highly suburban feel of Palo Alto and the surrounding areas of California’s mid-peninsula, there is an unmistakable cosmopolitan sensibility in the Hausner community. It turns out that the majority of *all* families at the school are transplants from somewhere else, be it Mexico, South America, the FSU, or all over the US. Language and second languages in general are treated with respect, understanding, and feature as a core value in the lived life of the school. Reading the school’s philosophy statement,² we learn, “Hausner curriculum instills a love of the Hebrew language,” and “Hebrew literacy and fluency unlock the richness of Jewish literature, and connect our students with Jews everywhere.” Hausner has one of the largest populations of Israeli families, who comprise around 30% of its enrollment. Most work in the high tech industry or at Stanford University, just down the road.

Whereas a decade ago these families often came to the U.S. temporarily, today they tend to stay. Not immune to America’s strong forces of assimilation, these Israeli families come to view their children as American Jews, and see that English is their children’s language of choice. So within just a year or two, their children are speaking, and especially reading and writing, better *and more happily* in English than in Hebrew. They send their children to Hausner to keep their Hebrew alive and to ensure they preserve knowledge about and pride in their Israeli heritage. And families who do end up moving back are trying to keep their children’s skills strong enough to re-enter Israeli schools.

² Each of the seven distinct pillars — Learning, Community, Respect, Torah, Israel, Compassion, and Justice — has brief commentaries that school leaders use “midrashically” in classical Jewish hermeneutical fashion with board members, faculty, or prospective parents. Plus, the pillars are also depicted graphically by art that was commissioned by a local Israeli artist, Limor Gerstel, and are displayed on the campus grounds. For full text, see <http://www.hausner.com/podium/default.aspx?t=117955>.

As the heat was rising on Hebrew among American-born families, this unique demographic reality presented an added challenge. Responding to this challenge has turned into an opportunity with both planned and *unplanned* (and quite surprising) consequences. As planned, the program is better meeting these American born Hebrew speakers’ unique language instruction needs. The unplanned and surprising twist is the impact of this special instruction on the overall culture of Hebrew at the school.

First, and perhaps less surprising, the Israelis have become the school’s best promoters. Smith proclaims, “Our Israeli families are transplants now; it’s not a transient population. And they are incredible salespeople. We have an ambassador program for student recruitment, and my goal is to have the same positive word-of-mouth buzz in Palo Alto that we have in Tel Aviv!” Second, the Israeli-born parents, many of whom are now raising American-born children and see them as American Jews, are the source of a profoundly positive cultural shift which no one could have foreseen. A few years ago, in order to address this unique population’s Hebrew concerns, Hausner established a separate Hebrew track called, “*Dovreiv Ivrit*” (DI) or “Hebrew Speakers.” They used parts of Israel’s state curriculum so that if kids did return, their transition back to school in Israel could be eased and academic backsliding mitigated.

Overall, the DI track has been a great success. The program’s most formidable challenge has been meeting so many varied Hebrew competencies among these kids. They span many different levels of proficiency across the reading, writing, and speaking spectrum. So the biggest challenge that teachers in the track face is how to address all these different abilities at once. Sympathetic to this challenge, Israeli-born parents are quite pleased with the DI program and are willing to partner with their kids’ teachers to help address this “multiple *ramot*” [levels] problem. After all, the class sizes in the DI track are much smaller, often fewer than ten in a class, making it easier to teach such heterogeneous groups. But there is also the revelation that the DI track has led to an intriguing and wholly unanticipated turn of events for the culture of Hebrew at Hausner.

Small classes, high levels of proficiency, and an overall sense of seriousness have become very appealing to the *American-born* families whose children are in the TaL AM track, where

classes can have upwards of 20 kids. For a growing number of American-born children and their parents, the DI track has become an *aspiration*. A 4th grade Hebrew teacher estimates that an astonishing 50% of her students express a desire to “move up” to the DI track. The DI track has effectively provided native English speaking American Jews at Hausner with a vision for the Hebrew language that goes way beyond being called to the Torah for an *aliyah*. Children and parents alike have been granted exposure to something most American Jews do not usually get to witness. They see and hear their respective Israeli peers speaking Hebrew regularly, using it for actual communication, expressing their own unique ideas and feelings beautifully, compellingly, proudly. This high bar and emphasis on speaking fluency has become a motivating factor more powerful than anyone expected.

Parent and Student Perceptions

Among parents there is a range of interest in and commitment to Hebrew language education. Some parents share explicitly and unabashedly that Hebrew is simply not the reason they are at Hausner. Hebrew can sometimes drop to the bottom of students’ (and parents’) to-do lists, and other subjects take priority. It is frustrating to Silverman when he encounters this implicit hierarchy of values, since he wants Hebrew to be treated on an equal academic plane with every other subject. But as Hebrew teacher Noa Shmargard reports, “most parents are interested, involved, see the point of Hebrew and are usually in complete agreement that Hebrew is important.”

Then there are some Israelis who come initially only for the Hebrew, but realize over time how much else they are getting in terms of Jewish community, holidays, rituals, and identity formation. But whatever attitudes they start with, both Israeli-born and American-born parents appreciate the DI track. Remarkably, there are almost no social tensions whatsoever between Israeli and American parents or kids as a result. A few Israeli-born parents described how aware they are that speaking only Hebrew in the parking lot at pick-up time could create an impression of exclusivity, so they make sure to interact freely in English with American families as well. Moreover, there is no resentment that native-Hebrew

speakers’ kids got a special track developed just for them; on the contrary, those class sizes are now seen as a reward for those willing to work for it. Moreover, originally intended to address Israeli parents’ desire for more Hebrew, the DI track has also inadvertently addressed native English-speaking parents’ anxieties about *too much* Hebrew. The DI track also makes for smaller TaL AM class sizes.

The perception of Hebrew language’s importance has changed so radically at Hausner that both American and Israeli parents are beginning to question whether “native Hebrew speaking” is even the most relevant criterion for dividing the two tracks. “Some of my friends and I want to move up,” stated a 6th grader in the presence of her peers.³ “We think it’s a little too easy for us — not to hurt anyone’s feelings, but a lot of people in our advanced group could learn more to our level.” So the very definition of “Hebrew speaker” is in flux, and no longer part of the exclusive domain of Israelis or Israel, for that matter. So although native English-speakers are not entering the DI track in large numbers, the culture of Hebrew is transforming remarkably.

For example, with the quality of teaching and speaking performance perceived to be up, Hebrew has also enjoyed a status makeover. Kara Sanchez, a Hausner parent who is a second language and Spanish specialist at Stanford, has been doing some consulting for the school. She feels that Hebrew is valued at Hausner more than at many Jewish day schools because of the Israelis. She uses the same phrases as students describe the phenomenon: Hebrew has a “coolness factor.” As a group of 6th graders, all at different Hebrew levels, explained, “Hebrew is more exotic than Spanish, so it has a higher coolness factor.” Note the dramatic shift here: the fact that Hebrew is perceived as more foreign and exotic than Spanish makes it *cooler*, not less useful.

The inadvertent experiment is only just beginning. Silverman and Smith are not sure where it could lead and know they still have a long way to go, especially in the middle school. A 6th grade boy explained, also in front of his peers, that “a lot of people think of Hebrew as an easy class that you don’t have

³ By middle school, Hausner offers the following Hebrew levels: Beginners for new students, Low Intermediate, Advanced Intermediate, and DI.

to try in, or don't have to do homework for, but I try." His observation is astute; many middle schoolers wonder why they've been studying Hebrew for so long, "stressing over" difficult grammar for a language they will hardly ever use. Some do not view a few trips to Israel as sufficient motivation. By 8th grade, some are even adding up the hours of Hebrew study like prisoners serving a sentence. An 8th grade boy began his essay on what Hebrew meant to him this way:

1140: that is the number of Hebrew classes there are in an entire Hausner lifetime, which is nine years. Despite all this time spent learning Hebrew, I have not felt a really strong connection to the Hebrew language; actually I absolutely hated learning the language...

As part of a twinning project with Hachita School in Zichron Ya'akov, all Hausner 8th graders go on an Israel study tour. This reflection was part of a required trip assignment. Specifically, students were asked to write about a relationship that was strengthened while on their trip in one of five areas: Israel, Judaism, God, friendships, or Hebrew.

Since Hebrew is part of Hausner's core mission, it was integrated into the curriculum of the study trip. Thanks to that reflective assignment, Hausner now has a rich bank of moving testimonies regarding student relationships to Hebrew. For example, here is how our 8th grade "inmate" continued his reflection:

On the 8th grade trip, I was still not too comfortable with my Hebrew until I was with the Hachita students. With them, I was pushed to use all the Hebrew skills I had. Many words that I have not used for a long time just flowed out of my mouth, which revived a lot of the language that was stuck in the back of my head. By the end of the first day, my hosts were calling me an Israeli. I really feel like in Israel, my Hebrew had come out of its hiding place and with my Hebrew also came my personal connection to Israel...I could not stop speaking Hebrew in Israel since it felt like a dominant language in me...The Hebrew language is now a language that I enjoy and have more of an ease speaking. It is the language that was made by my ancestors in Israel, a place that will always stay in my heart. *Makom she ibie balev sheli col hazman...*

Eight of the 31 students who went on the trip, a quarter of the class, chose to write about the meaning of Hebrew in

their lives, and only two of those eight come from Hebrew-speaking homes.

Other excerpts from a young man's moving statement are representative of the reflective depth and honesty in all eight essays. Note how his sentiments, too, are marked at first by disdain for Hebrew in intermediate grades, but then evince surprise at how much he has actually learned, and how the Israel tour provided the authentic test that proved it. His elation with "thinking" in Hebrew and the power he discovers it has to animate actual life tasks such as eating, shopping, building friendship and intimacy with people and places that would otherwise have remained locked away from them, are also echoed in many of his classmates' writings:

Before going to Israel, Hebrew didn't really come easy to me. The teachers helped me with extra support, but it still didn't seem like enough. Not until landing in Tel Aviv did I realize my ability in Hebrew. The signs were in Hebrew, the people spoke Hebrew, everything was in Hebrew; and I could read and understand almost all of it. Ever since 2nd grade, I had always disliked Hebrew class. I would not put enough effort into learning and I would rarely do my homework because it did not give me any more practicing and it wasted my time. Not until the beginning of 8th grade did I start putting effort into Hebrew class...

When I got off the bus to step into a crowd of Hebrew-speaking, smiling Hachita students, it immediately struck me that I had to use all of the Hebrew that I knew in order to build a better relationship with them...I was not thinking what to translate, I was thinking in Hebrew. Never had this happened before and it seemed very special. It seemed that Hebrew really wasn't a bad language or boring to learn, and that I had a special skill in it...A lesson was just taught and learned inside of me that will likely affect what my Jewish and Hebrew future will be.

When students are able to discover personal relevance for Hebrew and make what teachers call "text to self" connections, they are surprised at the latent and passive knowledge but also latent appreciation and attachment they have for the language. But all the learning seems to remain latent until there is a clear and explicit purpose, or rationale, for acquiring the language in the first place.

Multiple Rationales for Hebrew

Upon coming to Hausner in July 2008, one of Noam Silverman's first acts was to draft a Hebrew mission statement. He enlisted Aviv Monarch, former head of Hebrew and Jewish studies, and Eti Zehavi, then Hebrew coordinator. Together they composed the text that Silverman then presented to the Hebrew faculty who accepted it gratefully. Hebrew teacher, Noa Shmargard, has noticed a marked and positive change in attitudes towards Hebrew at Hausner since the statement was put together. She explains that it conveys "a more solid, administrative position that Hebrew is here to stay, and that it is as important as Israel education." Calling it "a good first step," Silverman views it as a nascent effort, which he feels needs to be fleshed out significantly. Even this beginning draft, though, clarifies the new direction for Hebrew at Hausner. The first half of the statement establishes a Jewish heritage rationale. The second half then goes on to extend language proficiency areas for students, above and beyond reading comprehension:

Hausner Jewish Day School Hebrew Department Mission Statement

At Hausner we teach Hebrew as a means towards the development of our students:

- Facility with modern Hebrew and Jewish texts
- Relationship with the state of Israel, its citizens, and culture

We believe that the study of Hebrew informs our collective Jewish past, present and future.

Students are encouraged to reach proficiency (not necessarily fluency) in the following areas:

- Reading Mechanics
- Reading Comprehension
- Oral Comprehension
- Oral expression
- Writing

At least on paper, we learn that the espoused goals for Hebrew at Hausner are rooted in Jewish practice, skills and identity formation, or what is often called a "heritage rationale." In vivo, though, we learn that there are important divergences that complicate this picture. While it has not yet been named explicitly, a tension is emerging between two main approaches

to Hebrew education. In fact, from speaking with a range of stakeholders at Hausner, a full continuum of cases for Hebrew becomes evident. As he guides the emergent visioning process, it will be interesting to see how Silverman explores this tension around rationales for Hebrew.

At one end of the continuum lies a "second language" argument, while at the opposite end, there is the "heritage language" argument. Teaching Hebrew as a second language means it is valued primarily as a key to unlock another rich culture and literature, with its own ways of thinking, naming, and doing things, just as learning Spanish or Mandarin would. Critically, teaching Hebrew as a second language also means it is treated on equal academic footing with any other second language teaching. It requires assessment practices, instruction, and curriculum to be rigorously interrogated, carefully chosen, and informed by scholarship in the field. The heritage language argument, typically made by Jewish educators and also the rationale of the TaL AM curriculum, contends that Hebrew is, first and foremost, a tool for building Jewish identities. The heritage language proponents maintain that without Hebrew, the integrity of Jewish learning and living is compromised. Without it, holidays, rituals, traditions, and texts become empty and banal.

Until TaL AM was developed as a full language arts program with objectives in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, most heritage approaches to Hebrew teaching emphasized phonetic decoding for the purpose of reciting prayers aloud and reading and translating Bible texts and stories. So Hebrew education was mostly unconnected to the pedagogical and proficiency assessment practices developed for second language instruction in recent years. Herein seems to lie the crux of the tension: critics of the heritage language approach remember this history and worry seriously about academic good practice. This can even hold true for those who place Jewish identity formation top on their educational priority list. For example, when students associate studying Hebrew with a near wholesale lack of achievement, this does nothing to improve their associations to Jewish identity formation, and can often weaken them. For this reason, even strong proponents of Jewish identity-forming agendas can favor teaching Hebrew as a second language, and the use of materials and methods commensurate with that approach.

Indeed, the principal of Hebrew and Jewish studies, and co-author of the current mission statement, Rav Silverman himself finds the second language arguments most compelling. A Modern Orthodox Jew in his own practice, Silverman explains that he does not want to be connected to a Jewish day school like the one he grew up in, where “Hebrew was a joke and the kids hated it.” He attributes this failure to a wholesale lack of educational purpose and vision and maintains,

Any good education goes back to goals. We’ve been teaching Hebrew in America for 80 or 90 years and it’s still in an atrocious state. We’re at a disadvantage for Hebrew. We’ve had decades of teaching Hebrew without purpose or rationale. It has always been easier with Jewish studies. But Hebrew has been stunted.

Moreover, Silverman questions aspects of TaL AM. Although it may be the only curriculum today bearing an explicit and systematic rationale, it is a rationale that may not work well for Hausner, precisely because of its emphasis on Hebrew as a heritage language. Silverman views TaL AM as too heavily intertwined with a particular expression of religious Judaism to resonate for Hausner students’ lived realities. “For example,” he says, “take the pictures in TaL AM textbooks: they’re of girls with skirts, and *kippot* only on the boys.” He concludes offering a passionate and resolute Hebrew vision of his own:

So there is a cultural disjuncture, plus we don’t have the hours for it. I don’t foresee Hebrew becoming a pervasively integrated part of the school where we have assemblies in Hebrew, or have a Hebrew-speaking gym teacher. Besides, I don’t want our kids to end up learning that Hebrew only matters because of religious or *tefillah* reasons; I want kids to be empowered by Hebrew because I want to see Hebrew as a living language and being part of an ongoing vibrant culture that they have a role in, not just in the Beit Knesset, but in the JCC courtyard, in Israeli music, and in Israeli society. Let’s face it, for most families Hebrew is a foreign language. TaL AM treats it as a heritage language, but the vast majority of American kids today just aren’t there.

For all these reasons, Silverman is convinced that Hebrew needs to be taught as a second language. Smith, too, would like to tie goals to teaching modern Hebrew language, and the

benefit of learning a second language, which she sees is the case parents understand and relate to best.

So Hausner is an example of a Jewish day school with a strong Jewish mission where it is commonplace to hear students point to Jewish studies as their favorite class, and, at the same time, the school’s leaders do not favor heritage language rationales for teaching Hebrew. Even as many teachers, parents, and students share this philosophical stance towards Hebrew education, there exists important variation.

For example, when 6th grade TaL AM teacher Shani Wellisch was asked, “Why teach Hebrew?” she made a clear heritage-based case. She understands her work as a sort of “*shlichut*” [ambassadorship] whose purpose is “to connect students to the culture, tradition of Hebrew through the language.” By contrast, 4th, 5th and 7th grade TaL AM teacher, and past Hebrew Coordinator, Eti Zehavi recounts, “I am over the heritage language argument.” Despite her avid use of the TaL AM curriculum, which is fully steeped in heritage purposes, Zehavi explains a recent and radical shift in her thinking:

You know I’ve really gone past the heritage rationale. I’m really beyond it now. I used to be there, but now I view speaking another language as an extra power over other people. For example, I was eating falafel the other day at a Middle Eastern restaurant, and there were some people speaking in Arabic. I spoke with a waiter in Arabic and was just talking about how Muslims usually greet with hello and goodbye, when someone else heard me speaking Arabic and said, “Oh, are you from Syria?” And we started talking, and I had this ability to connect with them. My husband, who does not speak Arabic, felt left out. I enjoyed the experience and I felt good. So I say to our students, “You are very lucky you are getting this tool, a tool to open up other worlds and integrate with other cultures. Speaking another language provides confidence and power.”

In action, Zehavi’s philosophy translates into an intense focus on student ability to improvise with spoken Hebrew. She uses “improv” games and plenty of TPR, with the aim of helping students to be able to express their own unique and authentic feelings and ideas in Hebrew. She does not emphasize grammar, believing that it needs to be heard naturally. Every so often, she tests this hypothesis and will try to insert some

grammar in a lesson, which only reminds her why she does not do it regularly. “No parent or child ever asks for more grammar,” she says with a knowing smile.

Noa Shmargard, who taught Hebrew very successfully in the middle school for nine years, and now also enjoys teaching 1st and 2nd grade DI students, offers yet a third variation on a rationale for Hebrew. At first it sounds like she is making an exclusive and passionate call for heritage, but her final sentence proves pivotal and results in creating a nuanced hybrid version of a Hebrew rationale. She begins,

Hebrew is like the bloodline that connects us all. I read once a quote about Hebrew being the “nerve center of the Jewish people.” It’s our common bond and ground. A strong Hebrew base allows for peoplehood connections. When students end up at Hillel or at *shul*, Hebrew provides this common ground and bond. You can’t have a Jewish education without Hebrew. If you learned only in translation, you would miss culture and *ruach* [spirit]; you can’t do it in translation. The *ruach* is not secondary, it’s the essence. You need a basic understanding of the language for this. It’s a heritage language, because functionally, how much are you going to use it in your two or three visits to Israel, really? That’s a whole lot of effort and time invested for something you’re hardly going to use. But, the assessment criteria should be as for any second language instruction, just like Spanish or Chinese.

Notably, aspects of the same argument, such as finding Hebrew useful and satisfying for visiting Israel, become compelling and logical for many and are entirely dismissed by others. Shmargard, for example, finds it absurd to learn Hebrew for this reason.

Esther Rubin, the Israel trip and BASIS coordinator who is also a long-time early childhood educator, offers yet one more rationale for Hebrew at Hausner; it could probably strengthen either the second language or the heritage language argument. For Rubin, the main goal is to empower children from a young age to “*think of themselves as Hebrew speakers*.” In just the same way teachers refer to five and six-year-olds as “young readers” despite their rudimentary skills, she explains how they are viewed as readers, nonetheless. “And they come to *believe* they are readers and experience themselves authentically as such,”

she asserts. “So we tell them they are readers — even if they’re not doing it perfectly, they’re doing it.” Rubin’s argument addresses an identity-forming aspect of Hebrew education. Uniquely, it is one that goes beyond the Jewish identity-forming agenda: it focuses on building a *Hebrew speaker’s* identity.

When asked to speculate about whether the Hausner community currently espouses the second language or the heritage language approach, Kara Sanchez, the parent and Stanford language instructor who is doing some consulting work with the school in the area of Hebrew, imagines the heritage rationale to be stronger. But she qualifies her hunch, positing that the focus is likely less about wanting students to parse texts or participate in *tefillot* and more about using it to converse in Israel. Herself a graduate of a K–8 Community Jewish day school in Milwaukee, Sanchez believes Hebrew teachers should not be saddled with all the Judaic content, which results in students with a limited grasp of Hebrew. Sanchez views it hard enough to teach a non-native language in America without mounting additional expectations, and feels that day schools are best used as cultural incubators for learning another language, which the home alone cannot be. As she puts it,

To really have proficiency in a language is not easy to achieve. Even though we spoke only Spanish to our kids at home, they’re immersed in an English-speaking environment. So I have realistic expectations. My [Hebrew] goal for my own son is that he will come out able to converse at least at a ‘mid-intermediate’ level by ACTFL standards [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, which developed national standards of foreign language learning].⁴ It’s the primary reason we came to a Jewish day school. I am a language teacher, my husband converted, and I told him how important this was to me. I told him

⁴ The 2012 ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking describe five major levels of proficiency: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. The description of each major level is representative of a specific range of abilities. Together these levels form a hierarchy in which each level subsumes all lower levels. The major levels Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice are further divided into High, Mid, and Low sublevels. The Guidelines describe the tasks that speakers can handle at each level, as well as the content, context, accuracy, and discourse types associated with tasks at each level. They also present the limits that speakers encounter when attempting to function at the next highest major level. For more information, see: http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012_FINAL.pdf

that we could provide the Jewish piece without a Jewish day school, but the language piece we couldn't do without the context of a Jewish day school instruction and, importantly, community.

Silverman invited Sanchez to work on a project assessing speaking proficiency of Hausner's 8th grade students at graduation, specifically with non-native Hebrew-speaking, American-born kids. Fluent in Hebrew, Sanchez also applied her extensive training in conducting speaking proficiency interviews to determine students' levels according standards developed by ACTFL. It turns out that there is a very narrow band of proficiency, with the whole group speaking in the intermediate-low or novice-high range. This is just below the aspirations she has for her own children, which motivates her to help Silverman and the school to move forward with Hebrew.

Sanchez has a clear proposal for the direction for Hebrew at Hausner: to present a system where teaching focuses on speaking proficiency. Among the four areas of language proficiency — reading, listening, writing and speaking — *speaking*, Sanchez points out, is the weakest of the four areas for non-native speakers learning a new language. So Sanchez would like, just as they do at Stanford, to train Hebrew teachers or others to measure speaking proficiency among Hausner's students every quarter. The focus would all be on speaking proficiency and not primarily on engagement or student or parent satisfaction. "If students are happy, that says nothing about proficiency," she cautions, adding, "Plus, day school students feel they learn the same body parts and holidays over and over, and end up feeling like babies. So if students could demonstrate progress to themselves, they could actually feel more engaged, and enjoy a sense of real achievement."

Thanks to the efforts of Zehavi, Monarch, and Silverman, corroborated by the Hebrew team, Hausner now has formally stated goals in the Hebrew mission statement. However, that statement reveals only part of a much fuller and richer story about a range of differing and sometimes conflicting informal convictions surrounding Hebrew education. In classic Hausner style, teachers have tremendous intellectual freedom in their classrooms, with no one "party line" to follow. They are encouraged to express their own ideas, styles, and methods in their teaching, and take initiative to do so. The rationales are

varied and in flux. This can and does lead to a very stimulating and creative teaching environment.

At the same time, a process of openly and explicitly naming the differing thoughtful opinions and working toward shared consensus could maximize teaching and learning potential. Such a shared rationale may also help decide if "native speaker" is, indeed, the most salient dividing line for the TaL AM and DI tracks, or if shifting cultural and demographic realities of increasing numbers of students of all backgrounds aspiring to become *dovrei* and *dovrot Ivrit* will necessitate a new demarcation. Whatever is developed, Silverman wants the rationale to reflect Hausner's unique, localized, and specific social and cultural realities. Thus, a key challenge for Hausner's Hebrew future may be how to navigate, manage, and maybe even *use* these multiple motivations to continue to build on its advances in Hebrew education.

Hebrew Possible: Turning Up the Heat By Design

Back in the academic year of 2007–8, it was initially the concerns — and radical proposal — of some parents that turned up the heat on Hebrew. Smith took this heat as a challenge to improve, not to eliminate Hebrew in the middle school, and at Hausner overall. The heat has triggered thoughtful and effective changes to Hebrew education over the last five years. Today, there is a clear sense that the heat is continuing to be turned up, but now from within and among the leadership. Parents and students are much more appreciative of the Hebrew language. Energies and conversations around Hebrew revolve around improving proficiency (especially speaking), not around reducing its hours. Many aspects of the culture of Hebrew at Hausner have been transformed, and leaders have created the opportunity to continue with the next chapter of its change process.

For example, various stakeholders are now looking ahead to solving at least three formidable Hebrew conundrums. First, teachers, students, parents, and administration talk about wanting to find ways of extending the "magic" of Hebrew learning from primary grades to the intermediate grades and to middle school beyond. Second, Silverman and his colleagues would like to mitigate or even collapse what they call

the “Jewish studies-Hebrew studies” divide. They would like to raise Hebrew classes to the status that Jewish studies classes enjoy. Even if students do not come to call Hebrew their “favorite class,” as they do with Jewish studies, Silverman is striving to reduce the disparities in reputation, joy of learning, and students’ sense of achievement between the two departments. Finally, there is the dilemma of whether and how to reframe the DI track, so that the program is not exclusively thought of or designed solely for native speakers of Hebrew.

Big questions are under consideration. Will leaders consciously move toward making the second language case (with Sanchez’s focus specifically on speaking) the fulcrum of Hausner’s rationale for Hebrew education? If so, what might be the implications for teaching *tefillah* and synagogue skills? Will there be a shift from fostering positive feelings about Hebrew learning toward prioritizing serious content and performance? Just as clear academic standards dictated in other areas of the school’s curriculum do not necessitate a compromise of joy, neither

should it be the case for Hebrew, so the argument goes. To what extent such a focus would become more or less attractive from a recruitment perspective is also unclear. But what does seem patent is that many parents, teachers, students, and crucially, the school’s administrative leaders appear ready to leap at this vision of excellence in speaking proficiency.

Whatever Hausner’s “Hebrew Possible” holds in store, the school’s leaders have thus far positioned themselves to act purposefully and collaboratively. From Smith’s original resolve not to act from a place of weakness, Hausner is moving from strength to strength. The heat is now being turned up consciously and intentionally, and the core value of Hebrew is not up for negotiation; the only question is how to aim for and achieve its excellence. With its extraordinarily strong sense of community, unapologetic love for Israel, and thoughtful and collaborative teachers and leaders, the next five years could produce a bold and proud case for Hebrew on Northern California’s mid-peninsula that Gideon Hausner himself might have defended.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. What assumptions about the importance and value of Hebrew exist among your school's various constituencies (teachers, students, parents, administrators, others)?
2. Do you know what percentage of your students' parents were, themselves, graduates of Jewish day schools? How might this statistic inform how you convey the vision and mission of the school, and specifically its Hebrew mission?
3. Do you notice where challenges to aspects of the Jewish mission of your school come from? What areas or components seem to cause or attract "heat?" Which stakeholders seem to initiate the heat? What are the responses to the heat?
4. What "heat" has existed specifically around Hebrew, and where does it come from? What are the responses?
5. For Hausner, engaging as a faculty in the process of writing a mission statement for Hebrew may actually have led to a more ambitious curricular vision for Hebrew. What role do mission statements play at your school?
6. What is the profile of Hebrew education at your school? Does it have a very low or high profile in communicating the school's philosophy and goals internally and to the outside world? What factors do you believe led to the current situation?
7. How is Hebrew's "PR" at your school? Who manages its reputation?
8. What do your students say about their experiences in general studies and Jewish studies classes? How do those experiences compare with their comments about Hebrew studies classes?
9. Does your school's goals for Hebrew language learning lean toward the proficiency or the heritage rationale? Or something in between?
10. What could your *Hebrew Possible* be?