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HEBREW EDUCATION

By Elliott Rabin

Director of Thought Leadership, Prizmah

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There is scarcely an area of JDS curriculum in which so many schools are more invested—and so often disappointed with the results—than Hebrew. For many reasons, Hebrew is at the heart of everything that Jewish day schools are trying to accomplish. It is the DNA of Jewish culture, the medium of our classic sources and religious as well as secular texts. It is the language of the State of Israel, whose revival as an everyday spoken tongue is nearly unique in history and emblematic of the revival of the Jewish people. Hebrew empowers students to be able to read Jewish sources in the original, to recite tefillot and understand them, to leyn Torah, to converse with Israelis and understand Israeli music and shows, to appreciate Jewish literature, and much more. Hebrew language proficiency brings authenticity to day school learning and creates a connection among our students around the globe. The difference between doing Jewish in Hebrew and in translation is a pivotal difference that day schools can make.

Because so much is riding on Hebrew education in day schools, the challenges to success are particularly vexing. Hebrew means so much more to day schools than just a foreign language. It is an important key, for some the most important, for the transmission of Jewish identity. Acquisition of Hebrew is critical for the successful integration in Jewish synagogue and religious life. Many students struggle to achieve significant benchmarks in Hebrew. Given the emphasis in Jewish culture on educational achievement, especially in Hebrew, student difficulty in decoding can lead to anti-social behavior and feelings of marginalization (Scott J. Goldberg, "[Hebrew Reading Difficulties and Social Exclusion: A Path to Aggressive Behavior](#)"). Although day school parents may prioritize the value of Hebrew education differently, with Orthodox parents generally prizing the ability to read religious sources and non-Orthodox parents emphasizing conversing in modern Hebrew (Alex Pomson and Jack Wertheimer, "[Hebrew for What? Hebrew at the Heart of Jewish Day Schools](#)"), still most day schools teach biblical, rabbinic and modern Hebrew in the belief that familiarity with all three are important for Jewish identity.



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Over the past decade, many solutions have been proposed to address challenges in Hebrew education. Challenges are multifaceted: ability for students to function as a Jew in their community; ability to communicate with Israeli friends and family; ability to read and understand Hebrew texts such that they are meaningful and pleasurable. In reading, for example, “only 42% of day school students are reading Hebrew at or above benchmark levels by the end of third grade,” according to Scott Goldberg. Here are six questions, related to six critical elements of Hebrew education, that are frequently at the core of our conversations about Hebrew language instruction:

1. Do we have the right faculty with the right training teaching our students?
2. Are we dedicating the time that we think we should on Hebrew instruction?
3. How should we be teaching Hebrew in our school?
4. Are we presenting the best Hebrew materials in a way that engages students and builds their abilities toward goals that are ambitious and achievable?
5. Do we have accurate measures to know whether our students are meeting the goals we have for them in Hebrew?
6. How do we articulate how important Hebrew language is to our school?

Note: These elements exist holistically within the ecosystem of a school. For optimal results, schools may wish to address all of these elements over time.



1. STAFF

Studies show that it is the teachers, not the curriculum, that are key to unlocking the potential in each student to learn a new language. Finding Hebrew-speaking educators with a background in teaching language and literacy is an acknowledged challenge. Schools in large communities often note the shortage of qualified Hebrew teachers. Schools in smaller communities lament that Hebrew teachers don't want to move there or stay there. Often, schools hire native speakers who lack training or experience in language instruction. If hiring teachers from Israel, the school may find that they do not understand American students, communities, or the culture of American schools. Even when they adjust well, Israeli teachers often return home after teaching for a couple of years.

Hebrew at the Center notes that the school leadership may not feel equipped to identify a potentially effective Hebrew language teacher or know how to provide them with the support and supervision they need in order to succeed. Some Hebrew teachers lack the understanding of how to facilitate language learning or how to differentiate and reach each student.

Schools must look for ways to prepare Hebrew teachers to be effective classroom instructors. Graduate programs and in-service professional development that includes mentorship programs, new teacher induction, webinars, and peer group networks are available to support and professionalize the field of Hebrew language educators. Many schools now have teachers acquire best practices in SLA, second language acquisition. (See Pedagogy below.) Training can take place on site or at programs or conferences. Schools may look for programs specifically for Hebrew or more generally for teachers of SLA. The National Association of Hebrew Teachers, WZO and the Council for Hebrew Language and Culture sponsor an annual conference on Hebrew language. Examples of SLA conferences include [ACTFL](#), [IFLT](#), [CARLA](#), and many others.



QUESTIONS

- Do you find it challenging to recruit and retain well trained, qualified, excellent Hebrew instructors?
- What qualifications do you look for in Hebrew teachers? Which qualifications do you consider essential, and which others do you prioritize less and find can be developed through PD (mentorship, outside programming)?
- What solutions have you found to the Hebrew teacher pipeline challenge?
- How can you best support your Hebrew language teacher to be successful?

RESOURCES

- [Hebrew at the Center](#) offers ongoing professional development designed to educate school leadership, develop Hebrew language leadership and empower teachers with the tools and expertise to maximize each student's success.
- [iTALAM](#) has professional development both at in-person training institutes and through online courses.
- [Bishvil Halvrit](#) also offers professional development: in person, online webinars, and with consultation from its staff available as-needed.
- [Ivriyon](#) is a Hebrew immersion program at JTS designed to help teachers who already have a solid Hebrew background to raise their Hebrew level and become competent teachers of Jewish studies in Hebrew.
- Azrieli's Scott Goldberg teaches a required class in their MS program in "Teaching Hebrew Literacy," mentors a number of doctoral students in related topics, and provides evidence-based professional development for teachers, reading specialists, and leaders in Hebrew reading assessment, teaching and learning.
- In addition to immersive summer Hebrew language programs, [Middlebury College School of Hebrew](#) offers master's and doctorate programs in teaching Hebrew as a second language.



2. TIME

“In the old days,” legend has it (with some validity), Jewish day schools conducted half the day in Hebrew and half in English. The Hebrew was Ivrit be’Ivrit, without any English allowed. Today, relatively few schools run their Hebrew programs this way. Even fewer (though there are some) insist on teaching all Jewish studies in Hebrew; there have even been schools that insisted on Hebrew alone in art, music, gym, recess, and lunchroom. Alongside of the amount of time dedicated is the question of what aspect of Hebrew that time is dedicated for (modern, rabbinic, Tanakh) and what modalities are emphasized (speaking, listening, reading, writing).

When it comes to adult language acquisition, [Hebrew is classified as a “hard” language](#) for English-language natives to acquire, the third of four categories—right up there with Finnish, Tibetan and Kazakh. These languages require on average roughly 1100 hours for students to gain professional-level proficiency—and that’s for someone enrolled in a professional, adult-level language program. This is not to claim that Hebrew cannot be taught well in day schools, just an acknowledgment of the challenge.

Schools find creative ways to expand Hebrew education. Some may teach up to a half day entirely in Hebrew, while others try more intense but limited immersion periods. Hebrew can be used for subjects outside Jewish studies. Hebrew is often the language of the school’s public spaces—in hallways, on doors, on classroom walls. Teachers may use it for part of homeroom—or gym. The more that Hebrew pervades school life and culture alongside the curriculum, the more it can become part of a student’s knowledge and world.



QUESTIONS

- Does your school allow the use of English during Hebrew language instruction?
- How many hours per week or day is instruction in Hebrew?
- Are Judaic studies classes at your school conducted in Hebrew? If not, is that a principled decision, or is it because you can't find teachers to teach these classes well in Hebrew?
- Are there other spaces and activities where Hebrew is or can be used?

RESOURCES

- The AVI CHAI case study "[A New Tense for Hebrew: Past, Present and Possible](#)" by Tali Zerkowicz and Cheryl Finkel includes discussion of a school that increased class time in Hebrew.
- Devorah Steinmetz, "[Back to the Future: Achieving Hebrew Fluency in the Contemporary Day School.](#)"
- Joel Wolowelsky and others argue for and against Ivrit be'Ivrit, in the context of Orthodox education, in the [pages of Ten Da'at](#).



3. PEDAGOGY

Some proponents proclaim that pedagogy is at the root of the solution. Hebrew instruction rises or falls on the strength of instructors' pedagogic skills. Teachers need to understand, first and foremost, their students' brain: how language is learned. They then can tailor their instruction to ensure compliance with best practices in SLA education. Teachers should know successful strategies for engaging students; the stages of brain development and the stages of language acquisition; what materials to use and how to find it. (See "Staff" and Curriculum" for more resources on pedagogy and training.)

For younger students, [Hebrew Through Movement](#) teaches through an engaging, kinesthetic method. Dramatic exercises can be an effective way to motivate students. The [Rassias method](#) developed at Dartmouth is a program designed to improve language results through drama. Chabad's [Aleph Champ](#) Hebrew curriculum, designed for after school, is modeled on karate!

QUESTIONS

- What methods and approaches, resources, programs have you used to provide your Hebrew teachers with useful PD based in contemporary research on second-language acquisition?
- What pedagogies have you found to be most successful in inspiring student motivation, engagement, learning and high levels of achievement in Hebrew?
- Can your students apply Hebrew in various contexts and for differing tasks?

RESOURCES

- Vardit Ringvald, "[Shifting Paradigms in Hebrew Learning and Teaching.](#)"
- Joel Hoffman, "[This Is Your Brain on Hebrew.](#)"
- [CASJE's papers on Hebrew education](#) include literature reviews of second, heritage and foreign language acquisition, and the relationship between Hebrew and Israel education.
- Revel Arroway, "[All Jazzed Up: Six Fun Drama Activities for Dynamic Language Learning.](#)"



4. CURRICULUM

Whereas some double down on pedagogy, others look for the support and grounding of a solid curriculum. Especially given the staffing challenges, many schools find it unrealistic to train their teachers in contemporary pedagogic methods and expect them to create their own curriculum to match their goals. They rely upon the available curricular programs and entrust their teachers to use them wisely and judiciously so as to teach and inspire students.

Among popular curricula, [TaL AM](#), which serves classrooms in grades 1 to 5, is perhaps most widely used, serving 347 schools on six continents. TaL AM requires that teachers undertake their professional training in Hebrew pedagogy, given in the US and Israel, to supplement their books and online materials (iTALAM). [Bishvil Halvrit](#) (formerly known as NETA), a curriculum for students in grades 6-12, serving 200+ schools worldwide, includes introductory and advanced seminars and teacher support. Others include [Chaverim B'Ivrit](#), a traditional curriculum including textbooks and workbooks with audio, and [Ulpan Or](#), which offers online learning along with custom-designed programs in Israel.

QUESTIONS

- Does your school use a set curriculum or do your teachers create a unique curriculum for the school?
- Have you found a curriculum that is a good fit with your school's overall mission and its vision for Hebrew education?
- How do you evaluate where the curriculum is successful for you, and where it isn't? Does the curriculum provider offer extra help and resources, including professional development?



5. ASSESSMENT

In recent years, tools have been produced to enable schools to measure student proficiency against more objective standards. Assessment now is no longer merely a summative report showing whether students have acquired knowledge taught in the classroom. Instead, assessment can be an ongoing measure of student progress toward acquiring proficiency in Hebrew with the ability to use the language in varied contexts and to understand the achievement of accepted key benchmarks for language acquisition. Two of the most prominent tools used today, comprising dynamic, holistic assessments that aim to reveal students' proficiency levels, are [Avant Assessment](#), for modern Hebrew, and [MaDYK](#), for Hebrew reading. An alternative assessment method, testing for mastery of skills, includes Kriah Scan and Koallen, along with the tests and rubrics provided by iTALAM and Bishvil Halvrit.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has published clearly defined research-based proficiency levels for language learners, across numerous languages. Sophisticated assessment enables teachers to personalize Hebrew instruction and to gauge student achievement against measurements used by experts in SLA. It also provides school leadership with data to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a school's program and its teachers in order to direct resources strategically and align the school's Hebrew mission with its results. Working together, Hebrew at the Center and Avant developed an adaptive online assessment tool to provide state-of-the-art measurement tools for Hebrew language proficiency acquisition.



QUESTIONS

- Does your school have a consistent philosophy and method of assessment overall, and/or for Hebrew specifically?
- How is your school using student performance data to advance your delivery of Hebrew language instruction?
- What goals do you want your students to achieve, and how would you assess them to know if they are progressing toward those goals?

RESOURCES

- Vardit Ringvald, "[Why Assessment? Decision-making for Effective Hebrew Language Curriculum.](#)"
- Sheila Bong, "[Data Is The Secret When It Comes to Language Proficiency.](#)"
- Tova Shimon, of TaL AM, "[Assessment for Success.](#)"
- Scott J. Goldberg and Elana R. Weinberger, "[Are We Ready for a Standardized Measure of Hebrew Reading?](#)"
- Scott J. Goldberg, "[MaDYK Assessment of Hebrew Reading: The Importance of Progress Monitoring.](#)"



6. MISSION

Given there are so many profoundly different ways of addressing the question “why learn Hebrew?” schools may, or perhaps should, choose to articulate the place of Hebrew in their mission, the importance of Hebrew in their approach to Jewish education. From this larger vision can derive the school’s particular curricular goals. Hebrew is integral to the way that day schools of vastly different approaches conceive of Judaism and teach it. Part of this vision involves considering the relative emphasis that a school places on reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Within those areas, schools can consider the levels of accuracy, fluency, competence, or mastery—and how it defines those terms—of Tanakh, Tshba (rabbinics) and modern Hebrew, in written and spoken forms, that it aims for its students to attain. Another part of a school’s mission comprises the symbolic importance of Hebrew in Jewish culture, community and history.

A mission statement for Hebrew—emphasizing that this is a priority for the institution—can help Jewish day schools make the case for Hebrew education not only to parents, but to board members, the administration, general studies faculty, students, and the broader community. All day school stakeholders will benefit from a clearly articulated position on the value of Hebrew, and in this way, school culture toward Hebrew will change. Further, during this time when competition for college is paramount, many parents question the benefit of Hebrew education. A well-articulated mission can help explain how Hebrew is a central component of the values that the school embraces and that parents signed on for. (Examples of a day school Hebrew mission can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

QUESTIONS

- Does your school have a mission for Hebrew language?
- Does your school’s mission and vision make clear the place of Hebrew in your curriculum and Jewish life?



RESOURCES

- In the AVI CHAI case study "[Meshuga' La-Davar: Hebrew](#)," Michael Berger and Pearl Mattenson showcase a school that put Hebrew bilingualism at the core of its mission and marketing.
- Rafi Cashman and Mitchel Malkus, "[Discovering the Unknown: More Research to Make the Case for Hebrew Language Learning](#)."
- Tal Gale, "[Hebrew Rationale](#)" and "[Hebrew: Principles & Best Practices](#)."
- Eli Kaunfer, "[Hebrew Literacy: Passport and Lynchpin](#)."
- Alex Pomson and Jack Wertheimer, "[Hebrew for What? Hebrew at the Heart of Jewish Day Schools](#)."

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