1. Reform religious school, Sunday morning service:
   Rabbi: *Boker tov* [good morning].
   Children: *Boker or* [morning of light]...
   Rabbi: Who knows which *chag* [holiday], which holiday, is coming up?
   Children: *Purim*!
   Rabbi: *Tov me’od* [very good]! ... Can I get a *madrikh* [guide/assistant teacher] to help hand out the *siddurim* [prayer books]? ...
   Rabbi: OK, *yeladim* [children], now I’d like you to open your *siddur* [prayer book] to page 23 for *Modeh ani* [I Am Grateful]. (32.5% Hebrew words)

2. Conservative Jewish day school, back-to-school night:
   Principal: *‘Erev tov* [good evening].
   Parents: *‘Erev tov*.
   Principal: *Brukhim haba’im* [welcome]; welcome to a new school year... I’d like to call up *morah* [teacher] Yael, who will tell you about some exciting changes in our *Tanakh* [Bible] curriculum. (25.8% Hebrew words)

3. Pluralistic Jewish summer camp, dinner:
   Camp director: *Madrikhim* [male counselors], *madrikhot* [female counselors], you know which *chanikhim* [campers] from your *tsrifim* [cabins] need to take meds... After *Birkat hamazon* [Grace after Meals], please go directly to the *te’atron* [theater] for *pe’ulat ‘erev* [evening activity]. (36.0% Hebrew words)

In these three excerpts from Jewish communal life, the structure of the sentences is primarily English, as are many of the words. But a large percentage of the words and phrases are Hebrew, some from the Jewish religious tradition, others from Modern Israeli Hebrew. This chapter explores this phenomenon, which I call Hebrew infusion. I explain that Hebrew infusion in contemporary American Jewish communities continues a millennia-long Diaspora tradition of incorporating Hebrew words into other languages. And I argue that the rise of the State of Israel has changed the way Diaspora Jews use Hebrew and has led to tensions surrounding Hebrew infusion.

Data in this paper come from my longtime observations of American Jewish life, including a recent study of Hebrew use at American Jewish overnight summer camps with my colleagues Jonathan Krasner and Sharon Avni. The camps we observed represent a diversity of orientations, including pluralistic, Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, Haredi, and several
specialty groups, including Russian-American, Israeli-American, Sephardi, Jews of color, and eco-Jewish. Some of the camps are strongly Zionist, and for others Israel plays only a minor role. In all of the camps we researched, there was at least some Hebrew. This ranged from just a few Hebrew words or phrases, like Shabbat shalom (“peaceful Sabbath” greeting/closing) and ruach (spiritedness), to full Hebrew sentences used for announcements in Zionist movement camps like Ramah, Bnei Akiva, and Habonim Dror, and even a few Hebrew immersion programs and camps.

Sociolinguistic Concepts

Before I discuss how Hebrew is used at camps and other Jewish institutions, I offer some sociolinguistic background. Although we may think about languages as idealized entities like English, Japanese, and Arabic, people around the world mix elements of multiple languages. Much of this language mixing can be found in the speech of bilinguals, but even people who have little or no competence in a heritage language may use elements of it in their primary language of communication. Research on various immigrant and indigenous groups in America and elsewhere has found that they incorporate elements of their ancestral language into English, even if they are not able to communicate in that language. Examples include Puerto Rican- and Mexican-ancestry Americans in New York and California, Maoris in New Zealand, and Punjabis in London. Sometimes they are aware that they are using words, sounds, or structures from their ancestral languages, but other times the influences are below the level of consciousness. Some people use words from languages to which they have no ancestral connection, either to connect with members of the group or to make fun of them. But much of the language mixing involves elements of the group’s ancestral language uttered in in-group settings.

Throughout history, Jews have exhibited language mixing to various degrees and in various ways. During the Babylonian Exile they acquired Aramaic, incorporating elements of their ancestral Hebrew. As they spread throughout North Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and parts of Asia, they picked up local languages and maintained Hebrew and Aramaic in their liturgy and study of sacred texts. Their spoken and written languages, known today by names like Judeo-French, Judeo-Persian, and Judeo-Malayalam, tended to resemble the local languages but incorporated words and other influences from Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as from ancestral languages like Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Greek, and Judeo-Italian. (Yiddish and Ladino, the two most well known Jewish languages, are exceptions in this history, as they were maintained for centuries away from their lands of origin.) Many of the Hebrew words in historical Jewish language varieties referred to religious concepts or served as euphemisms (especially in relation to bodily functions and death), or they offered a way to speak secretly, especially in business and when referring to non-Jews. Some communities created poetry that alternates between Hebrew and the local language line by line or stanza by stanza. Others penned translations of Hebrew texts that maintain the original word order, yielding innovative phrasing in Arabic, Spanish, Italian, etc.

Jews today continue this tradition of language mixing, as we can see in the use of Yiddish and Hebrew words in Jewish Swedish; in the use of Judeo-Arabic, Yiddish, and Hebrew words in Jewish Latin American Spanish; and in the use of Yiddish, Ladino, and Hebrew words in Jewish American English, to give a few examples. In addition to the traditional Hebrew words,
many Modern Hebrew words have influenced the languages of contemporary Jews, such as *kippah* (skullcap), *dati* (religious), and *kol tuv* (all the best [a closing phrase]).

Related to this hybrid language use is the fact that some communities engage with a language, even if they are not proficient in it. This is a phenomenon that Netta Avineri calls “metalinguistic community.” Her research on Yiddish clubs in America found that many people—who may have some knowledge of Yiddish but tend to be monolingual English speakers—celebrate Yiddish and gather in communities of like-minded Yiddish enthusiasts. They are socialized to have certain dispositions toward the language and knowledge about it, as well as to use select words and phrases. As Avineri points out, being part of a Yiddish metalinguistic community does not necessarily involve learning to speak or read Yiddish. This concept builds on Jeffrey Shandler’s notion of “postvernacularity.” He argues that at Yiddish festivals and other events, the fact that something is said in Yiddish is more significant than what is said.

A related contribution is Lewis Glinert’s finding that British Jews use Hebrew as a “quasilect,” which he defines as a system “in which next to no one ‘knows’ the language in the sense of being able to interpret or produce an infinite number of well-formed structures and in which the communication of meaning has come to play a fairly minor role.” Glinert also suggests that Hebrew for most American Jews today is “quite literally lip service: *alef bet*, a bit of ‘living Hebrew,’ and a smattering of texts. From literacy to ‘smatteracy.’”

These constructs can be applied to Hebrew use in America. In a coauthored chapter of a book about Jewish identity, Avineri and I use the concepts of hybrid language use and metalinguistic community in offering advice to supplementary schools and other Jewish educational institutions. Many of these institutions have the ideal goal of fostering Hebrew proficiency but find this goal unattainable in just a few hours of instruction each week. We suggest that they consider two more attainable goals for their students: competence in Jewish English and membership in a Hebrew-oriented metalinguistic community. In other words, a successful graduate of a program that adopts such goals would be able to comprehend and produce sentences in English laced with Hebrew words and would feel a strong personal connection to the Hebrew language and, through it, to Jews around the world.

**Hebrew Infusion**

How do Jewish institutions use Jewish English and foster Hebrew-oriented metalinguistic communities? They do so through what I call “Hebrew infusion,” the incorporation of fragments of Hebrew—words, blessings, prayers, songs, and signs—into an environment where another language is the primary spoken language. I use the metaphor of infusion for a few reasons. In an infused drink, a fruit, vegetable, or herb is placed in the liquid and changes the flavor of the drink. Let us use the example of strawberry-infused water. People who drink it may or may not have access to the berry itself, but the water takes on the flavor of the berry. Similarly, in a Hebrew-infusion environment, participants may or may not have access to the full Hebrew language, but the Hebrew fragments they encounter give the mostly English conversations a flavor of Hebrew. There are gradations of infusion: some drinks have only a hint of berry flavor, and others have bits of pulp and seeds. Similarly, some Hebrew-infusion settings include only a few Hebrew words and blessings, and others include many
Hebrew words, songs, signs, etc. And within a given camp or classroom, there may be no Hebrew words in one activity but many in another.

Two additional elements of infusion are intentionality and awareness. Generally, a teacher, rabbi, or camp staff member uses Hebrew words and songs intentionally, and the students, congregants, or campers recognize that the words are not part of English proper. There may be exceptions to this. Jewish leaders may use Hebrew words in their English conversation without intending to or even without realizing they are Hebrew words, and participants might not notice the Hebrew words. But for the most part, infusion is intentional and conscious. This intentionality on the part of institutional leaders is what makes infusion a special case of language mixing or hybridity.

Language infusion is not limited to Hebrew. I refer to the broader phenomenon as “ethnolinguistic infusion,” the incorporation of elements of a group’s special language in the context of another primary language with the goal of fostering group members’ connections to the language and/or to the group. Ethnolinguistic infusion can be found in many indigenous and immigrant communities. For example, Elem Pomo Indians in California have shifted to English as their primary language, but they incorporate elements of their ancestral Elem language in their rituals, including songs, blessings, and the greetings and closings that frame their ceremonies. Some children of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada have very little proficiency in Tamil, but they incorporate Tamil words into English, recite Tamil prayers without understanding them, and participate in Tamil speech competitions, coached by their parents on correct pronunciation and intonation. We can also find examples of ethnolinguistic infusion at summer camps. A Hawaiian culture summer program of Kamehameha Schools is conducted primarily in English, but campers use Hawaiian words for cultural practices, as in this quote from their website: “Through learning experiences that include work in a lo‘i kalo, fishpond restoration, mele, hula, and more, keiki learn about interdependence in the ahupua‘a and how it sustains the Hawaiian people.” The construct of “ethnolinguistic infusion” can be useful in describing language use and conceptualizing pedagogical goals not only in the Jewish community but in many immigrant and indigenous groups.

Hebrew Instruction and Hebrew Infusion

Most Jewish day schools, supplementary schools (also known as religious schools or Hebrew schools), and a few summer camps use Hebrew instruction, which I understand to be different from Hebrew infusion. Hebrew instruction might include exercises teaching students how to decode Hebrew letters or conjugate verbs; translations of words, Biblical verses, or blessings from Hebrew to English; Hebrew through movement; and, in rare cases, Hebrew immersion. If asked what their goals are in using such techniques, most teachers would answer that they want students to attain proficiency in Hebrew reading, writing, and/or conversation. In contrast, Hebrew infusion will not lead to the ability to read, write, or speak Hebrew, but it may lead to students feeling more connected to the Hebrew language and, through Hebrew, to Jews in Israel and around the world. Teachers who use Hebrew instruction might have the secondary goal of connection to Israelis and other Hebrew speakers through the language in which they are becoming proficient, and teachers who use Hebrew infusion might have the secondary goal that students learn a few Hebrew words. But the primary goal of Hebrew
instruction tends to be proficiency, and the primary goal of Hebrew infusion tends to be connection. 

In educational institutions that offer Hebrew instruction, Hebrew infusion is also found. Even as teachers conduct lessons about Hebrew letters and grammar, they may also infuse Hebrew words into English classroom conversation, and objects and locations in the building might be labeled with Hebrew signs, sometimes with transliteration and translation. Blessings, prayers, and songs tend to be recited in Hebrew or in a combination of Hebrew and English. Such Hebrew infusion is found not only in schools but also in synagogues, Jewish community centers, Federations, and other Jewish communal institutions.

Which Hebrew Words Are Infused in Which Settings

The quotes at the beginning of this paper offer three examples of how Hebrew words are infused into English. In all three, some of the words are nouns that refer to Jewish religious rituals, holidays, and concepts (Purim, Tanakh, Birkat hamazon). Other words are greetings (boker or ‚erev tov, brukhim haba‘im), evaluations (tov me‘od), and nouns referring to roles, locations, and activities discussed in the institution (yeladim, morah, chanikhim, tsrifim, te‘atron, pe‘ulat ‚erev). The words come from a combination of textual Hebrew (the language of Biblical and rabbinic texts, including liturgy) and Modern Israeli Hebrew.

In the three quotes at the beginning, the one with the highest percentage of Hebrew words is #3, the quote from a summer camp. This linguistic diversity is characteristic of Jewish communal institutions. Since camps have so many locations, activities, and roles that set them apart from everyday life, there are many opportunities to use Hebrew words. However, it is not inevitable that “cabin,” “counselor,” and “evening activity” would be given Hebrew names. Many camps, especially Orthodox and independent camps, do not use words like tsrif, madrikh, and pe‘ulat ‚erev and only use Hebrew words that are also common in other Jewish institutions. As my colleagues and I found in our survey of North American Jewish camps, the camps that use the most Hebrew words are part of four Zionist movements: Ramah, Young Judaea, Bnei Akiva, and Habonim Dror. Their high intensity of Hebrew infusion is related not only to their Zionist orientation but also to their historically Hebraist orientation, perhaps influenced by Camp Massad, a Hebrew-immersion camp network that was active in the 1940s through 1970s.

Tensions about Language Use

In many Jewish educational institutions, there are conflicting ideologies about Hebrew use. Two major issues are which type of Hebrew to emphasize and whether infusion is an appropriate use of language. I argue that both of these sets of tensions have been exacerbated by the rise of Modern Hebrew.

Many educational institutions struggle with the question of which type of Hebrew to emphasize: Biblical, liturgical, or Modern Hebrew. Of course, these varieties of Hebrew are quite similar, sharing many words and grammatical structures. In most non-Orthodox American communities, the varieties of Hebrew also share a system of pronunciation, because Reform and Conservative congregations and schools transitioned from Ashkenazi to Israeli pronunciation norms in their use of textual Hebrew at various points from the 1920s to the 1980s (especially the 1960s), due to increasing Zionist orientation and an influx of Israeli-born teachers. They changed from penultimate to ultimate stress in some words (Yom Kipper
became *Yom Kippūr*), merged the *kamats* and *patach* vowels (*borukh* became *barukh*), and merged *tav* and *sav* (*yisgadal* became *yitgadal*), even as they maintained influences from English, such as the pronunciation of /r/ and penultimate stress in many words. Despite the similarities between textual and Modern Hebrew, there are also many differences. As Modern Hebrew developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Palestine/Israel, it absorbed many influences from Yiddish, as well as from English, Russian, Polish, German, Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, and French. Gil’ad Zuckermann points out that Israelis have difficulty understanding the Bible and calls Modern Hebrew “Israeli,” or *Yisra’elit*, to emphasize its separate status.

Jewish educational institutions often wish to emphasize both the religious tradition and the State of Israel. Therefore, both textual and Modern Hebrew are likely to be part of their pedagogical goals. Learning one type of Hebrew may reinforce the other to some extent, but they cannot be taught as the same language. Asking someone to pass a pencil or ordering a *falafel im tshipsim* (*falafel with fries*) will do little to help a student understand the *Amidah* or the Book of Lamentations, and vice versa. Many schools recognize this and focus on different types of Hebrew at different times of the day, perhaps using different teachers. But some educators teach prayers, biblical excerpts, and Modern Hebrew conversation without emphasizing their differences, because they have assimilated the ideology that Modern and Ancient Hebrew are one and the same.

In most of the camps my colleagues and I visited, the issue of Modern vs. textual Hebrew was not salient, because they tend not to offer Hebrew instruction. Both Hebrews served as sources for the camps’ song repertoires and Hebrew words in their spoken and written English, especially Modern Hebrew, as in quote #3 above. But one camp did struggle with this issue. Eden Village Camp, located in Putnam Valley, New York, emphasizes “earth-based spirituality” and “radical pluralist Judaism.” Because they have campers and staff members with radically diverse political views, any talk about Israel could potentially be contentious. Therefore, they avoid activities or conversations about contemporary Israel and focus instead on religious, textual, and historical traditions, especially as these topics relate to food, the land, and environmentalism. Some feel that this decision should extend to language. As one staff member said, “If we are speaking Hebrew, because we’re not focusing on Israel, it should be Biblical Hebrew.” Another replied, “That’s not helpful for communication.”

To find out how this debate played out in practice at Eden Village, I analyzed the Hebrew words used within English during our visit and in two (lengthy) email updates. I found that of the 55 Hebrew words used, 46 are from textual Hebrew – Biblical, Post-Biblical, or Medieval (e.g., *menuchah*, “rest” and *adamah*, “earth”) and nine are from Modern Hebrew but not textual Hebrew (e.g., *lehitra’ot*, “goodbye” and *michzur*, “recycling”). The camp used some textual Hebrew words in innovative ways, such as naming their dining hall *Beit shefa*’ (House of Abundance) and calling their morning prayer options *Modeh ani*, including traditional *shacharit* prayers, yoga, and meditative weeding. Although Eden Village does not completely avoid Modern Hebrew, it puts a much greater emphasis on textual Hebrew, compared to many other camps.

Another issue that has been influenced by the rise of Modern Hebrew is the incorporation of Hebrew words into English sentences. Several of the camp participants we met were critical of Hebrew infusion, especially hybrid phrases like “to melts” (wait tables, from
Modern Hebrew *meltsar*, waiter). An administrator at a Young Judaea camp said that a funder told him that using words like *chadar okhel* in English sentences is bad for campers’ Hebrew language acquisition. A woman involved with the Daber program, which encourages staff at Ramah camps to incorporate more Hebrew, agreed with the funder. She said, “Instead of ‘Now we’re going to the *agam* [lake],’ it’s better to say ‘Akhshav holkhim la’*agam*’ or even ‘Akhshav holkhim la*lake*.’”

These critiques of Hebrew infusion relate to camp staff members’ desire to emphasize proficiency, especially in camps that historically used more Hebrew. But the critiques also stem from an ideology of language purity, an aversion to mixing languages. This has roots in eighteenth century Maskilic (and broader Romantic) discourse (see below), and it is also influenced by interactions with Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries) at camp, who comment on what they see as mispronunciations and grammatically incorrect uses of their native language.

Despite these stances favoring language purity, we also encountered positive evaluations of Hebrew infusion. One staff member at a Union for Reform Judaism camp thinks counselors should use more Hebrew and Yiddish words in their English, because it serves as “a really powerful tool” for community building. An administrator at Camp Solomon Schechter disagrees with the notion that camps should reject infusion in favor of immersion. “To insist upon full sentences in Hebrew is going to cause some campers to retract . . . And then they could potentially say that *limmud* [Jewish learning] is not fun or *Ivrit* [Hebrew] is not fun.” These camp staff members agree with others that Hebrew is important, but they do not share their aversion to hybrid language use. They believe that positive feelings about Hebrew and using language to connect with other Jews are more important, and realistic, pedagogical goals than Hebrew proficiency.

Hebrew Ideology throughout History

Debates about Hebrew are not new, as John Efron explains. In the Middle Ages, Sephardi Jews debated whether Hebrew or Arabic was more appropriate for expressing secular ideas. Hebraists in the Italian Renaissance argued that Biblical Hebrew was superior to Mishnaic Hebrew and medieval *piyyut*, which incorporated some foreign influences. German Maskilim (enlightened Jews) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries felt that Hebrew was the Jews’ special language and that they should use it rather than Yiddish or local non-Jewish languages. They advocated for Sephardi Hebrew pronunciation as the most pure, moral, enlightened variety, in line with their preferences in art and architecture.

There is also a history of purists criticizing Jewish languages as mere jargons of their non-Jewish correlates, including but not limited to their hybrid use of Hebrew words. For example, Yiddish was called *zhargon* and Ladino *zhirgonza*, even in newspapers written in those languages.

In addition to these polemical discourses, there have also been times when Jews of various regions came together through migration, such as Italian, Ashkenazi, and Sephardi Jews in early modern Venice; and Romaniote (Greek), Sephardi, and Ashkenazi Jews in nineteenth century Salonica. These situations of contact may have bred discussions of which types of Hebrew should be used and taught, depending on the degree of interaction between Jewish communities.
The rise of Modern Hebrew and the establishment of the State of Israel added a new element to these debates. Is the rationale for studying Hebrew to connect to the religious tradition or to the State of Israel? Should students study textual or Modern Hebrew? Must all Hebrew teachers be native speakers? Does Hebrew infusion impede students’ learning Hebrew as a full language? Before the twentieth century, Jewish students (generally boys) learned Hebrew through their study of biblical and rabbinic literature. Today Jews can continue this practice, but they can also learn Hebrew as a living, spoken language by interacting with native speakers, consuming Israeli media, and visiting Israel. In fact, Hebrew educators attuned to twenty-first-century pedagogical discourses often insist on teaching Hebrew through immersion techniques, rather than only textual engagement.

Deborah Lipstadt, in making a case for Hebrew education for Jewish communal leaders, argues that relegating Hebrew only to the realm of Israel “may have been and continues to be a strategic mistake. It has limited the symbolic scope and importance of Hebrew.” She goes on to say that “Hebrew, together with a broad range of practices and beliefs, is something that helps define who and what we are as a people and a community.”

The historical revernacularization of Hebrew and the influx of Israeli Hebrew teachers in American Jewish educational institutions have influenced not only how Hebrew is taught but also the ideologies that circulate within Jewish communities.

Conclusion

Since antiquity, Hebrew has been the language of Jews’ holy texts and a source of Judaic enrichment for their spoken languages. Due to the work of Eliezer Ben Yehudah and others, Hebrew was revernacularized and is now the primary spoken language of millions of Jews. The State of Israel has become a focal point for Jews around the world, and Israelis now serve as teachers, counselors, and staff members in many Jewish communal institutions in the United States. These transitions have led Jewish educators and other leaders to incorporate more (and different) Hebrew words into English sentences, especially in summer camps. They have also led to more tensions about what type of Hebrew should be taught and how Hebrew should be used in English-speaking settings. The main issue underlying the debate is pedagogical goals. Is the goal to encourage Hebrew proficiency or to foster positive feelings about Hebrew and, through Hebrew, to Jews in Israel and around the world?

Ideally, every American Jew would be proficient enough in textual Hebrew to engage with biblical and rabbinic texts and proficient enough in Modern Hebrew to read contemporary Israeli literature and debate political and philosophical issues in Hebrew with Israelis. Some Hebrew immersion settings are successful in fostering proficiency, such as ulpanim (intensive language programs), a few Jewish day schools, and the Hebrew charter schools and summer day camp programs spearheaded by the Areivim Philanthropic Group. But without the benefit of hundreds of instructional hours devoted to language, most Jewish educational institutions simply cannot graduate Hebrew-proficient students.

The tensions described in this paper will likely continue as long as American Jewish educators are influenced by discourses of historical Hebrew continuity and language purity and as long as they maintain the unrealistic goal of proficiency. On the other hand, with a realignment of goals, the tensions could be minimized. As Elana Shohamy writes in her critique of Diaspora Hebrew education, “A strong argument that is often brought up is that Hebrew is
learned for symbolic reasons only, not to enable the learners to communicate in the language but rather to learn a few words, [to] be able to read the prayer book, to acquire some general familiarity with the language, and to create a feeling of identity and belonging to the Jewish group . . . While such goals do have justifications and can be strongly supported, it is important to note that they are rarely stated explicitly in such ways.” I hope that this chapter sheds new light on Hebrew education and that the goal of connection through Hebrew infusion will be “stated explicitly” throughout American Jewish institutions.

Notes
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These practices of language mixing are referred to by various terms in various fields. What literary scholars refer to as “macaronic,” linguists refer to as “code switching,” “code mixing,” “loan words,” “borrowing,” “fused lects,” and “translanguaging.” A community that is “multilingual” uses two or more languages, and if they use two languages in a stable way for
distinct purposes (e.g., Judeo-Arabic for everyday interaction and Hebrew for prayer), they are exhibiting “diglossia.” See discussion of these and related concepts in Yaron Matras, *Language Contact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).


12. In her research on Yiddish-oriented metalinguistic communities, Avineri (Heritage; Socialization) found that Yiddish was often used for cultural concepts, greetings, closings, and evaluations.


According to Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: Free Press, 1987). Words that are used in textual Hebrew with very different meanings were classified as Modern Hebrew (e.g., *chug* means “circle” in textual Hebrew but “elective activity” in Modern Hebrew and at camp, and *teva* means “substance” in textual Hebrew but “nature” in Modern Hebrew and at camp).


