Hating Hebrew: Isn’t It Time for a New Legacy?
by Laura Abrasley

The clipped conversation between Josh and his committed but conflicted father as they walk towards their car makes Jewish educators everywhere cringe with embarrassment. “I know you hate Hebrew School, Josh. You know what? I hated it too. But your mother and I really want you to have a Bar Mitzvah.” Josh looks briefly at his father but then drops his head as he silently acquiesces. We are not sure what distresses us more. Josh’s lack of choice to keep hating Hebrew School, that Josh’s father hated Hebrew School and expects Josh to hate Hebrew School, or the fact we have still not done anything about all the Joshs and their fathers who hate Hebrew School.

When did we trade the legacy of Judaism’s beautiful, layered, meaning-infused sacred language for a dreaded detachment and hatred towards a foundational aspect of our collective Jewish past, present and future? Somewhere over the years of becoming resolutely American, we Jews have lost the point and the purpose of teaching Hebrew to our children. A visit to any one of the supplementary Hebrew programs in any one of countless liberal synagogues across the United States confirms Josh’s affirmation. Hebrew School is indeed boring. Even worse, the programs offered often fail to teach even cursory competency in these snore-filled afternoons. As Jewish educators Yacobi and Yacobi lament, “The ability to read Hebrew is one of the key outcomes expected of students [and yet] later in life, when faced with a siddur, the nervousness about reading”¹ Hebrew comes rushing back. Hebrew School and, in particular, the instruction of Hebrew that takes place

in its halls, may well have ruined the liberal American Jew's relationship to the Hebrew language.

Hebrew was never meant to be a language considered by Jews as foreign. Throughout most of our history, it has been viewed as the “conveyor best that carries history, culture, liturgy and tradition.” At some point, however, in our not so distant past, we moved away from teaching Hebrew as a distinct marker of Jewish culture and identity. Today, Jewish children in many liberal synagogue settings across America are often at a loss to tell you why they learn Hebrew. In thinking about why Hebrew is important to teach, Jewish educators often put forth the ‘Jewish language’ argument or the ‘synagogue skills’ argument. The ‘Jewish language’ argument proposes that Hebrew is the common language of Judaism and all Jews. Hebrew is the magic key that unlocks the box of Jewish identity and heritage. The ‘synagogue skills’ argument articulates that Jews need access to Hebrew in order to be active participants in synagogue life. In both cases, Hebrew is portrayed as an entry ticket to full Jewish participation.

Both arguments are compelling in the abstract but often fail sharply when put to the test of current sociological realities. Elana Shohamy, a professor of language education, states simply that “Jewish languages, [especially Hebrew], have stopped being identity markers for Jews.” American Jews simply do not use Hebrew in the same way as in the past. While there are American Jews who can read Hebrew, it has failed to become the language of Jewish communication for the vast majority of this Diaspora community. This

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2 Charles David Isbell, The Hebrew Teacher: Guru, Drill Instructor or Role Model? An expanded version of a paper presented in October 2002 at Wake Forest University, accessed online at [http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/isbell.pdf](http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/isbell.pdf)

has led to the perhaps paradoxical situation that American Jews can feel a strong sense of Jewish identity but lack any real knowledge of Hebrew.

The ‘synagogue skills’ argument also lacks relevance in actual contemporary context. Most American Jews participate regularly in liberal synagogue life with very minimal Hebrew skills. Not only can they, indeed, access these communities but interaction and deep meaning occurs in the absence of true Hebrew skills. Hebrew language barriers have been removed by prayer transliterations and translations and congregants now rely on professional Jews for access to the ancient texts. Thus, we have arrived at another curious paradox: American Jews seem content to pray in a language they do not understand and find meaning in a text someone else has interpreted for them.

What, then, might be a compelling rationale for American Jews, especially those who participate in liberal Jewish communities, to learn this complicated ancient language? One powerful answer can be found in the “Ten Principles for Reform Judaism” written by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1998. The ninth principle argues that Hebrew is our “holy tongue.” It represents the preservation of our heritage. It is the language of Jewish ideas for all generations. “Hebrew connects us with ancient and modern Jewish ideas which are difficult to render in [vernacular] translation.” Thus, while it can be argued that Hebrew is no longer the main marker of Jewish identity, it remains

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4 Text of the ninth principle: “We are heirs to a holy tongue. We echo our people’s belief that the Hebrew language is endowed with a particular measure of kedushah. Despite overwhelming odds, the Jewish people preserved Hebrew in the face of centuries of exile. Hebrew binds us to Jews in every land, and especially to our brothers and sisters in the State of Israel. Hebrew connects us with ancient and modern Jewish ideas, which are difficult to render in translation. We shall strive to read Hebrew, to speak it, to let it help articulate our prayer and inform our study. The more familiar we are with Hebrew, the more at home we shall feel within our people’s heritage.”

5 From the above text of CCAR principles
“instrumental in creating identity” as well as “enforcing and perpetuating that identity.”

American Jews still need Hebrew and Hebrew still needs American Jews.

The time has come to rephrase and rethink our questions. Jewish educators need to examine the reasons behind why we teach Hebrew before we can move forward to the questions of what Hebrew to teach and how to teach that Hebrew. Imagine the power of a frank and open community conversation about the 21st century reasons for teaching and learning Hebrew. What might happen if, like linguist Lewis Glinert suggests, we “remove all of the preconceptions of what teaching a foreign text ought to be about” and work towards a solution that reflects the variety of reasons an American Jew today might want to engage with the Hebrew language?

Some would suggest we should only teach Hebrew as a language of heritage and history. Others might propose we involve students with [the] language as an example of a people’s most powerful means of communal integration and collective expression.” Then again, perhaps we should create programs that emphasize the spiritual qualities of the language instead of the socio-linguistic approach? Or does it make sense to radically redefine the American Jewish lexicon and teach Hebrew as phases, idioms and quotations?

The choices of Hebrew language and Hebrew language instruction must open up in radically new ways that are reflective of the needs and aspirations of the local and national

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Jewish communities involved. If we genuinely aspire to be a pluralistic Jewish community, then we must adopt a “pluralistic view for teaching [Hebrew] that matches the pluralistic identities of Jews in the United States.”

Jewish educators today must open wide the debate of why Hebrew is so essential to American Jewish identity. If it is indeed, as the Reform movement’s principles suggest, a centerpiece in the intimate relationship between culture and identity, we must create multiple pathways that all Jews can comfortably navigate. Each and every Jew deserves a welcoming way into a connection with the language and a chance to decide how to make it a part of their unique Jewish identity. These multiple pathways require all of us to wrestle now with the educational and instructional questions as well as the multitude of solutions in uncomfortable yet remarkably new ways.

We cannot accept the failures of the past or the status quo of the tragic bargains struck by all the Josh’s and their dads to “agree” to hate Hebrew school. There is no need to compromise with boredom in order to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We owe it to every future Josh as well as ourselves to recreate and reconnect him with a Hebrew that is inspiring: one that deepens Jewish identity formation, rather than weakens it. Then, our Hebrew school parking lot parent conversations will be filled with the power of our new, clear and compelling rationales for teaching and learning Hebrew. Josh’s father will smile at him as they approach their car, “Son, I’m so glad you love Hebrew. I really do, too!”