On that pivotal day, each Bar Mitzvah student approaches the bima (pulpit), occasionally with reverence, but often with excitement about the upcoming party or the pile of gifts to be opened. The student opens his mouth and recites the requisite prayers, reads from the Torah, gives his speech, and finally his day has begun. He did not understand a word that he read. The prayers were recited (or in many cases, stumbled over) by memory- sometimes through transliteration. The Torah he chanted was learned from a recording that the Cantor made for him. Though he understood that this day was about becoming a Jewish adult, he still can’t comprehend the texts that would teach him what it really means to be a Jewish adult.

Philosopher of education, Michael Rosenak, in his essay, “Educated Jews: Common Elements,” wrote:

The concepts of language and literature are helpful in describing what we should like to see happen in education: namely, to initiate the young into the language of a culture by way of its most cherished literatures, including and perhaps particularly those formative literatures called sacred or “classic.”

Based on this assessment of the sorts of Jews and Jewish identities that we ought to be forming in our schools, we are failing. The Bar Mitzvah student described above is unable to participate in the textual conversation taking place among the Jewish people. He does not know what texts to look at to find the answers – and even if he found them,

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he likely would not be able to understand them without the aid of an already interpreted translation.

Unfortunately, we cannot blame his ignorance on his status as a “Hebrew School Dropout.” He went to the synagogue pre-school, and studied at the synagogue Sunday school. As a child he learned the basics about the holidays, and some friendly versions of Bible stories. In third grade he began Hebrew school. He started by sounding out the letters, then in fourth grade he began stringing together words, then finally in fifth and sixth grade he began decoding the prayers that he needed to read fluidly for his Bar Mitzvah. There is no question that he passed all the requirements. Then how could he have comprehended so little when his big day came? It seems that the problem is in the standards: the requirements themselves. Our schools have perfected the art of decoding— but we don’t teach our children to really read the Hebrew language: not when comprehension is implied in the definition of reading.

There is a problem in our Hebrew schools, but we have yet to name it. We see that are students are frustrated, or even unhappy. As educators, we might try out different textbooks or Hebrew-Through-Prayer programs, hoping that one of them will make the learning easy and fun. We train our teachers to be energetic, to play games and sing songs with our students. We get creative by having our students work in pairs, in groups, individually, and as a class. We might tighten the reins on learning by instituting mandatory Hebrew tutoring, or by having parents sign off on homework assignments. But nothing seems to work. Nothing makes reading Hebrew easier, or more meaningful.

This is because our students aren’t learning to read Hebrew. They are learning to decode a series of vowels and consonants, but they are not making any meaning. They
might be able to follow along in services with their finger on the page of the *siddur* (prayer book), but they are only matching symbols to sounds. Perhaps our students are frustrated and unhappy, because they *know* what it means to *really* read: They know how to read in English, how to be engaged in a text and to use it in informing their lives. We have told them that they would be able to “read” in Hebrew too. For all this time we have called decoding reading, but we have not made comprehension a priority, or even a standard. It is crucial for us as Jewish educators to go back to the beginning and rethink the goals of Hebrew education, Do we wish to uphold the standards that Rosenak articulates by his Common Elements, or is our purpose something different? In order to have our Hebrew programs meet our Hebrew goals, we must re-evaluate, and accurately name what it is that we intend to do.

If you recall learning how to speak and read English, you will notice that it most often happens in a very clear, logical order. First a child learns to understand and speak the language naturally. The child hears the language all around, and eventually learns to communicate. Therefore, when s/he first begins learning to read, and first puts small sounds together, the sounds have instant meaning. For example, when putting together “c” with “at,” the child can make a picture of a “cat” in his or her head. This is something meaningful and useful that they can understand. Conversely, when a 3rd or 4th grader puts a “bet” with a “nun” and they learn the word “ben,” there is no context for understanding that a “ben” is a son. Reading is not what is happening in this case, because reading implies meaning-making. This is why students learning to read in their native tongue learn to do so fluidly in just a few years, whereas the children in American Reform Hebrew schools rarely, if ever, reach this point of comprehension.
One might argue that we are not aiming for students in our schools to be able to communicate. Despite the appeal of conversational Hebrew, our schools are intended to train students for Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and in this case, the ability to communicate not actually necessary. This is a fair statement. However, our standards of comprehension still require evaluation.

Lucy Calkins, the author of *The Art of Teaching Reading* and the founder of the Director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project explains that in developing a program for teaching students to read, the educator must be a part of, and be dedicated to the process of teaching reading. She writes, “…we need to know that we have not only the authority but also the responsibility to author – to co-author, really – a comprehensive vision for teaching reading.”  

Her vision for teaching reading involves a great goal of instilling a love and passion for literacy, by means of learning centers, mini-lessons, and opportunities to hear stories read out loud. The same grand vision is necessary for Hebrew education programs. Our goal must first be defined, and following that, a plan of action that is consistent with the vision must be developed.

The 1999 Pittsburgh Principles do make a statement about the importance of Hebrew learning to the Reform movement, stating: “We urge Jews who reside outside Israel to learn Hebrew as a living language.”  

However, it is imperative that our schools decide in what realm they want their Hebrew to live, and then, to teach to that goal. While it might not be entirely consistent with Rosenak’s vision, it is likely that one

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goal of our Hebrew programs is to teach the Hebrew required for a meaningful prayer experience. This is similarly evidenced by the popularity of Hebrew-through-prayer textbooks in Hebrew schools today. However, prayer cannot begin and end in a textbook. Just as students learn to read in English by making meaning out of the words on the page, in prayer, too, students need to make meaning. This can begin at an early age by having meaningful prayer experiences with children, learning what our prayers are about, and encouraging comprehension and connection to the words and ideas in the siddur even before or as the students are learning the Aleph-Bet. Then, when students reach the age at which they can hold the siddur themselves and begin the decoding process, the prayers immediately have meaning and context in their lives. They have heard the word Shema, and much like the youngster who can create an image in his mind of a cat when he sees the letters “c-a-t,” so too does the child have an understanding on a deep level of the prayer if she has heard it and felt it even before she learns to read it. In this vision, the siddur itself is a textbook to be used and engaged with. The prayers are not displaced into a workbook, but much of the work of learning the language itself is done in the avodah of t’fillah (the work of prayer).

Of course, depending on that crucial vision and standards of the school the method will vary, but the point remains the same: decoding is not enough. If we do not want our students to walk away frustrated and unfulfilled, it is our duty to give them the opportunity for real learning. This begins in early childhood, and cannot let up until the vision has been clearly seen and lived.

We must be able to envision the 13 year old student getting up on the bima and leading the congregation with kavannah (intention) of the heart. Internal though
kavannah may be, its foundation must still be taught by those of us who have chosen to
be responsible. Our students have the capacity to be engaged, and it is our duty to
provide them with material that will engage them. After all, Hebrew is not a puzzle to be
solved, but as the Reform Principles have urged, it is a living language that can, and
should be felt by the Jews who live it.