Hebrew education as we know it must stop. For the past 80 years, Hebrew language educators conduct their lessons in many different forms and for a variety of reasons in the field of Jewish education. Whether it is for the purposes of Israel education, for participation in prayer, for studying Jewish texts, or any other, there is an ongoing interplay between the learning of Hebrew and the practice of Jewish life in America.

However, one very specific category of Jewish practice that dominates the entire purpose for Hebrew education in liberal Jewish supplemental schooling; namely, to enable participation in and leadership of that synagogue’s prayer service. This focus on liturgical Hebrew often leaves students challenged to hear sounds that are foreign to them, to speak words that seldom find use outside of their synagogue, to write in an alphabet they do not comprehend, and to read a language they do not understand.

It has not always been this way. Linguist and scholar of Jewish education, Sharon Avni, reminds us that in the 1960s, a “shift in ideology and priorities” took Hebrew language education from promoting fluency towards learning for religious practice (Avni 2014, p. 267). In fact, Avni explains that this was the impetus for the name change of Hebrew schools to religious schools, signifying the shift away from “Hebraic fluency and cultural literacy” (Avni 2014, p. 267). As early as 1963, a resolution from the 1963 Biennial Assembly, the UAHC (now the URJ) recommended that confirmands of Reform supplemental schools should have “a reading knowledge of the Hebrew language, sufficient at least to read and comprehend the Hebrew portions of the Union Prayerbook and the Union Haggadah” (Avni 2014 citing Grand, p. 268). From this point on, decoding became the primary goal of Hebrew language education.
The key phrase of that 1963 UAHC resolution is “read and comprehend.” In her influential article called “Why Bonnie and Ronnie Can’t ‘Read’ (the Siddur),” Lifsa Schachter, professor emerita of Jewish studies and former dean at Siegal College, as well as a Hebrew language instruction specialist, points out that, “in the world outside the supplementary school, reading has a range of definitions, but the primary one is to derive meaning from printed symbols” (Schachter 2010, p. 76) Within the world of supplementary school, however, reading is better understood simply as “decoding, sounding out unknown words, and reciting or declaiming prayers…” which is definitively “not reading in the commonly accepted sense” (Schachter 2010, p. 76). Within a decade, scholars were already reporting that the focus on decoding compromised meaningful Hebrew education, as seen in a 1973 article in the Jewish Journal of Education (Avni 2014, p 268). Today, a full 40 years later, I would assert that learning to decode Hebrew is anathema to Jewish education as a whole.

Jewish education is often considered to be a holy endeavor, as we take pride in teaching our learners the morals of the Jewish tradition. Thomas Green, a widely-cited philosopher of education, argued that competence in a skill is a moral matter, and that ineptitude in that skill is immoral (Green 1987). Deriving meaning from printed symbols shows competence in reading, and anything less demonstrates ineptitude in that skill. Teaching to decode Hebrew is immoral. It does not deepen one’s Jewish identity formation and is limited in building towards Hebrew fluency (if that is even on the synagogue’s radar). With the overarching goal of preparing students to participate in and lead a prayer service, even decoding is a roundabout way towards this achievement. It takes students months, and sometimes even years, to successfully learn the Hebrew aleph-bet, without even a thought at combining those letters to form words (whose meaning will rarely be learned). Beginning with an oral base of Hebrew language provides an
alternate path of Hebrew education. Oral memorization of words and songs and prayers equally, if not better enables students to lead a prayer service. Schachter notes that “reading begins in and is based on oral sounds” (2010, p. 78). The relationship between speaking and reading is clear even in the Hebrew language itself, as the verb likro means both to call out and to read (Schachter 2010, pp. 77-78). It is imperative for students to gain an auditory foundation of Hebrew language before even attempting to learn the aleph-bet.

This ideological shift suggests that the oft-derided tool of rote memorization could be one way to provide this auditory foundation, and that memorizing Hebrew texts should be incorporated in the teaching of Hebrew in supplemental schools. Despite its reputation as being the opposite of critical thinking or meaning making, in the context of learning a language, rote memorization provides a superior route to making meaning out of the new language. Educational philosopher E.D. Hirsch recently explained that memorization “is helpful in making the procedures second nature, which allows [learners] to focus on the structural elements of the problem” (Hefferman 2010). With Hebrew education in the synagogue, the procedures become the performative acts of leading a service, and the problematic structural elements are students not comprehending the Hebrew words. Oral memorization provides the key to unlocking Hebrew prayers for students.

Teaching Hebrew from an auditory foundation calls for a fundamental change in education that could begin in a teacher’s very next Hebrew class session. Before asking students to determine between one boxy-looking letter from several others, teachers could try saying the words aloud and have students repeat it back. Anything to involve a kinesthetic approach is recommended as well, as employed in strategies like Hebrew Through Movement. If students already know the aleph-bet, teachers could chant the prayer first before asking their students to
read the words in Hebrew. Other suggestions involve the classroom setting in which Hebrew education occurs — exposing students to Hebrew print allows for “peripheral exposure to the shapes of Hebrew letters before embarking on a formal literacy program” (Schachter 2010, p. 84). For those students who feel comfortable, practice leading some or all of the prayer service at Hebrew school would provide authentic practice for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Another suggestion is to teach useful Hebrew vocabulary that can be utilized in a setting other than learning prayers. Classroom instructions — for example, the classic “sheket b’vakashah” — provide one helpful method of building an oral foundation of the Hebrew language.

Supplemental schools should teach Hebrew according to the natural process of language learning, which starts with an auditory foundation. In fact, teaching “from letter to sound instead of from sound to letter…” is fundamentally backwards, and furthermore, this letter-to-sound “approach leaves gaps, invites confusion and creates inefficiencies” for the student (Schachter 2010, p. 78). Tragically, the letter-to-sound approach is the common method employed in Hebrew education of supplemental schools. Given the social environment in America, where “Hebrew oxygen” (Mark and Chazan 2011, p. 7) is nonexistent, most American learners’ “brains lack prior auditory associations between Hebrew letters and the printed material” (Schachter 2010, p. 81).

An auditory foundation is just that - a starting point. By beginning Hebrew education through auditory means, without worrying about the shapes or names of letters, supplemental schools could focus on teaching students how to pray, as opposed to teaching student how to say prayers. This method would equally meet the goal of preparing students to lead a service, but it would happen in a less anxious setting. No longer would tutors need to be hired at the last minute, as the Hebrew singing, chanting, and reciting aspects of leading the service would likely
become almost second nature for the students as they learned more and more songs and prayers through auditory means. More time could be devoted to learning the meaning of the prayers, making the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony that much more meaningful for the leader.

It is time to accept that supplemental schools have failed at teaching students how to read Hebrew. Learning through recitation and memory achieves the same goal — prayer service participation and leadership — without spending three painful years (or more) just attempting to learn the Hebrew letters. When Hebrew education as we know it stops, the prayer learning we wish for could begin.
Works Cited


