

Bringing Israel to Life for Jewish American Children Hebrew: The Missing Link by Diana Yacobi

In the last decade, leadership has been hard at work identifying causes and crises facing the Jewish community. Crises cited include the rate of intermarriage, the weakened connection between the American Jewish community and Israel, and, most recently, anti-Semitism on the college campus, which has caught Jewish students unprepared for the challenges and aggressive tactics.

The community has also embraced specific causes, the centerpiece being support for day school education, as well as reinvigorating Hillel and promoting birthright Israel, the right of every young Jewish adult to visit and connect with Israel. Millions of dollars are poured into each of these worthwhile and important endeavors.

Within the world of Jewish education, the alarm has been sounded concerning teacher recruitment and retention. Among the reasons for the crisis cited by

Dr. Jonathan Woocher, president of JESNA¹, are the limited pool of applicants, low salaries, the preponderance of part-time positions, weak to non-existent induction periods, and lack of perks for teachers.

Missing from Woocher's analysis is the issue of specialized teacher training for Jewish education in general and for teaching Hebrew in particular. In spite of the centrality of Hebrew² for Jewish identity, religious practice and, connection to Israel, there is neither training nor a well-articulated ladder of skill development to ensure success for students. This problem is particularly acute in congregational schools. Universally, children shine at their Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, but the underlying educational experience, along with its deficiencies and wounds to the Jewish soul and self-esteem, are routinely ignored and left unexamined. Largely illiterate parents cannot evaluate the inadequacies of the educational experience and a primitive system perpetuates itself. Hating Hebrew school continues to be the legacy we pass on to our children. We laugh that it's normal and children can't escape the synagogue and Jewish involvement quickly enough. The ensuing malaise about one's Judaism clicks in like clockwork after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and everything non-Jewish is infinitely more interesting.

As a Jewish educator working full time in the field, I strongly feel the lack of teacher training with regard to Hebrew reading and language is critical and cannot continue. Armies of untrained teachers enter the classroom year after year, especially in synagogue schools, the main engine of Jewish education, to teach this critical skill without any training whatsoever, while, in fact, reading and language acquisition are well developed specializations in general education and emerging specializations in Jewish education.

Courses and teacher training are offered by some central agencies such as the Board of Jewish Education in New York³, but training is neither the norm nor the expectation within the profession or among lay leadership.

Training and skill in the teaching of Hebrew must become a marker of Jewish educational practice among all full and part time teachers. Our children deserve to feel confident and successful in Hebrew after years of schooling in a day or afternoon school, rather than frustrated and disappointed. Brandeis University now offers a graduate degree in teaching Hebrew⁴, which is designed to train students "to become professional teachers of Hebrew at all levels." The first of its kind in the United States, this graduate degree is an important first step

of Hebrew at all levels.” The first of its kind in the United States, this graduate degree is an important first step toward recognizing and correcting this situation. The Pre-School Hebrew Immersion Program being piloted by the Melton Research Center at the Jewish Theological Seminary represents another important initiative enabling children to learn spoken Hebrew during the pre-school years.

Connecting to Israel

Hebrew as the Centerpiece of the Primary and Elementary Years

Some steps that can be taken to bring Hebrew alive for our children include:

- Beginning Hebrew language exposure early, i.e., learning safah (language via songs, simple classroom phrases, holiday vocabulary undertaken in pre-school⁵, first, second, and third grades.
- Beginning formal Hebrew reading early, in second grade with an introduction to letters in first grade; introducing script writing.
- Offering Israeli teachers training in Hebrew language and reading acquisition, especially in the primary and elementary grades.
- Adapting reading material (e.g., Israeli children’s stories or Hebrew translations of stories American children know, such as Doctor Seuss). The critical elements here are big print, colorful pictures that reflect content and controlled vocabulary with a lot of repetition.
- Introducing songs early and consistently as part of the curriculum.
- MOST IMPORTANTLY, improving the teaching of Hebrew, which includes committing nationally to training ALL Jewish educators, educational directors and teachers, full and part-time, in language and reading acquisition as well as looking at teacher training (theory and methods) used in Israel and in the States.

Beyond Hebrew: A Chavaya Approach to Teaching Israel

A better experience with Hebrew offers our students one of the most potent and direct links to Israel. Looking beyond Hebrew however, as only one aspect of a more experiential approach, the larger objective is bringing Israel’s unique beauty, optimism, and creative energy to Jewish education. To pierce the consciousness of our students, we need to envelop them in the sounds, colors, tastes, and the look of Israel. An experiential approach would involve the following components:

1. Scenes, Settings and Props to go

A new teaching tool has burst upon the scene, The Attractive Land Map, produced in Israel. This 30’ by 14’ map of Israel designed for children to walk on, is supplemented by pictures, games and puzzles and is the first large-scale experiential approach to teaching Israel that has been prepared and marketed to schools.

This idea can be developed and extended. Just as one pulls this map out of a duffel bag and rolls out a whole experience for a school, other high quality types of scenarios, settings, and props could similarly be developed (a shuk, the kotel), packaged, and made instantly available to a schools.

For the most part, schools have to develop all the materials and props to create an Israel experience, involving many hours and volunteers. This is often too much of an effort for most synagogue schools. It

is more easily accomplished at day schools, at public schools as part of an international festival or at Jewish camps.

Other approaches involve serving Israeli food, focusing on Israel during Tu B'Shevat and Yom Ha'atzmaut, learning Hatikvah and performing Israeli songs (Zimriyah).

2. Israelis and Israel in Our Schools

Many Israelis teach in our schools. The goal often is to train secular Israelis to teach an Americanized Judaic curriculum, focused on tefillah and holidays and using American materials. Creating a professional specialization for Israelis that capitalizes on their background, encourages them to speak Hebrew in class, and trains them to teach reading and language, especially during the pre-school and primary years, would effect a powerful correction in Jewish education. Dramatic, artistic, and musical presentations designed by Israelis for American children and conveying the essence of the Israeli experience is another way to engage the many talented Israelis living in the US.

3. Olam Hayaed b'Yisrael

Following the kindergarten model of activity centers, Olam Hayaed b'Yisrael created in a specially designed classroom could offer settings such as pinat ochel (food corner), pinat mischakim (play corner), pinat Shabbat (Shabbat corner), Ba'yam (in the sea or at the beach), Ba'makolet (in the market), B'sifriya (in the library) that classes could visit on a regular basis in order to bring Hebrew and Israel to life. Israeli teachers can also tell their stories, especially during the elementary and middle and high school years, and presentations by Friends of the IDF (FIDF) could be offered.

4. Bringing Israeli Youth to the Synagogue – Cross-pollinating

Israeli youth already work in summer camps and youth work. Bringing Israeli teenagers for a field experience to religious schools to teach and learn about the pluralistic approach to Judaism in the US would help build the connection from the other end, offering young Israelis an alternative view of Jewish life, a contrast to the politicized, black-and-white nature of the religious experience in Israel and providing insight into pro-active forms of Judaism existing outside Israel.

5. Creating a Video Curriculum

Currently, teachers seek out films, some of which are better, others that are worse, some too long and without a teaching/ student engagement dimension.

Israel does wonderful photo and film work and I envision a video-based curriculum to include everything from Rechov Sumsum to history, personalities, sights and tours of the land, old/new contrasts, personal stories, and even TV commercials. I find many of Israel's TV commercials to be very amusing, youthful, and creative – Israelis seem to love to laugh at themselves! They offer another very real taste of Israel.

6. Bringing Hillel and JAFI to High School Students and their Parents: A Community Event

A growing anti-Semitic presence on college campus has also brought the Intifada to America's institutions of higher learning. Most Jewish college students are ill prepared to deal with these two issues, because they lack information, educational background, and a sense of connection to Israel. Hillels could provide schlichim to bring college issues to high school students at their synagogues during their junior and senior years. Hillels working together the Jewish Agency of Israel (JAFI) and synagogues could create yearly regional events to which teens are invited, both for socialization and for

education about Israel and issues emerging on college campuses.

At the same time, the Jewish Agency could reach out directly to parents and Boards of Education (at day and synagogue schools) with websites, speakers and even trips to Israel modeled on educator trips offered to teachers.

In short, traditional curricula alone will not do it. Improving children's experience with Hebrew; training teachers for this task; offering creative, experiential approaches to teaching Israel; and communal outreach to our teens and parents are needed to make Israel more real for Jewish American youth.

Endnotes:

1. "Solving Jewish Education's Personnel Crisis," in the *Jewish Week*, Sept. 5, 2003. See also Paul Flexner and Sandra Gold, "Providing for the Jewish Future: Report of the Task Force on Professional Recruitment, Development, Retention and Placement, JESNA, August 2003. The report focuses on communal infrastructure and procedures for improving recruitment and retention. It does not specify types of skills, training or professional development needed. See also the summer 2001 issue of CAJE's Jewish Education News, which focuses on Teacher Recruitment and the summer 2002 issue, which focuses on Kavod and Teacher Retention.
2. By "Hebrew," I mean basic reading skills, basic language skills, grammar and vocabulary.
3. Early Reading Success: What Research Tells Us, Dr. Frank Vellutino & Dr. Donna Scanlon, lecture given May 18, 1999. Meeting the Needs of Students in Jewish Special Education: Current Issues in Reading & Dyslexia, June 28-July 7, 1999. Graduate course provided by the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York (BJENY) in conjunction with Long Island University. Also offered by the BJENY, PROJECT SIR: Success in Reading, Summer Institute for Early Literacy, June 30-July 2, 2003.
4. Graduate Course entitled, Teaching Hebrew, part of the Hebrew program in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, Brandeis University, Vargit Ringvald, Director.
5. *Ma'alah, the Early Childhood Hebrew Language Immersion Network Project*, the Melton Research Center at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Frieda Robbins, Director. Ben Porat Yosef pre-school Hebrew immersion program in Leonia, NJ.
6. Videotaping life stories told by pioneers in Israel, a number of whom I had the pleasure to hear speak.

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