

## **An Adventure in Learning: Hebrew for Home Residents**

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### **Introduction**

The gerontological literature has only in the past decade begun to document what our forefathers have known and practiced for thousands of years. The Talmud espouses that the basis of all education is the study of the Torah. It goes on to define two basic educational principles. The first is that study should not be viewed as distinct from but rather as the major ingredient of the inner-content of life. The second is that education, under the guidance of a teacher, should be a life-long commitment and obligation.<sup>1</sup> While educational opportunities are increasing for older learners, the prevailing attitude is that formal education is primarily the domain of the young and is viewed as instrumental in the development of skills, preparation for careers and economic self-sufficiency. Little attention has been given to the importance of expressive aspects of education for young or old: those that add enjoyment to life contribute to one's ability to contemplate, reflect and indeed enable one to experience a sense of significant being. Dr. Abraham J. Heschel said "To attain a sense of significant being, we must learn to be involved in thoughts that are ahead of what we already

comprehend, to be involved in deeds that will generate higher motivation."<sup>2</sup>

One of the major problems we face in providing education for the old is that they do not view learning as a continuing process. They have grown up accepting the myth that the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is for younger age groups. To date, the literature on continuing education has addressed itself mainly to older people who still reside in the community. Little has been documented on motivating very old (75+) institutionalized individuals to expand their educational horizons.

This article will present a model of an effective Hebrew language program conducted at The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, a long-term care facility serving 800. We will explore the background and profile of the students, educational considerations in teaching the very old, the location and type of classroom, materials and procedures, attributes of the teacher, response of the students, and implications for expanding educational opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> "Education in the Talmud," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 6, Jerusalem, 1971.

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, "The Aged and the Family in Jewish Tradition," Paper presented at the White House Conference on the Aging, Washington, D. C., 1961.

### Background

Historically, Hebrew was viewed by most Jews as *lashon kodesh*, the holy language. Since the beginning of the 20th century, it has become a living language with a growing number of opportunities for Jews the world over to master the spoken language and the literature. Such opportunities were, however, for a variety of reasons not readily available to the current population residing at The Hebrew Home. Their adult years were out of necessity spent earning a living so that they could provide for their families. Tending to the activities of daily living so drained their physical and emotional resources that they were left with little or no discretionary time to develop hobbies or to participate in adult education. This lack of opportunity particularly to learn Hebrew in their younger years created a void which was from time to time expressed by a small group of residents to the activity workers of the Home. Budgetary limitations did not permit the hiring of a teacher; therefore, a qualified individual was recruited who could perform this service as a volunteer.

### Profile of Students

The core group of students who enrolled in the class, although interested and eager themselves, presumed that the group would remain very small. To everyone's surprise, the class has continued to escalate in both number and level of enthusiasm. Of the twenty students (as of this writing), sixteen are female and four male. This reflects the general population bias in the Home. It is our feeling that although more men may be interested, they seem reluctant to participate with women in an educational endeavor. Some men have been overheard commenting in an amused and derogatory manner, "Just look at the women going to *cheder*!" In addition, males tend to be unwilling to admit that they are not already knowledgeable for fear that it will be embarrassing or threatening to their self

image.<sup>3</sup>

The age of the group ranged from 72 to 94 years with an average of 83.5. All but one person was foreign-born with the majority having emigrated from Eastern Europe. Most members of the group had begun working in their mid-teens which seriously impeded their general educational attainment. Only six members of the group completed high school. All but three had some formal Hebrew education. The men attended *cheder* while the women had private tutors (a *melamed* or rabbi who came into the homes). Yiddish was their primary language and their knowledge of it far exceeded their knowledge of Hebrew. Fourteen people indicated that they read Hebrew. Most of these do so, however, without understanding the meaning of the words. Their reading skill was developed so that they could follow the service in the prayer book.

In addition to being deprived of education, they had had little or no time to devote to organizational work. Ties with the Jewish community had existed mostly on an informal basis, i.e. relatives, friends, co-workers. Only one-half of the group was affiliated with any formal Jewish communal, fraternal or religious organization. While seven members had attended night school for very brief periods to learn English, only three had participated on a sustained basis in continuing education prior to entering the institution.

On the whole, this program has enabled the Hebrew Class participants to join the growing numbers of non-traditional students in becoming new consumers of education.

### Special Educational Challenges

While the aspect of heterogeneity is common to most teaching situations, there are several extraordinary problems that must be acknowledged and confronted in a classroom

<sup>3</sup> Bruce A. Goodrow, "Limiting Factors in Reducing Participation in Older Adult Learning Opportunities," *Gerontologist*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (1975).

whose students are institutionalized and 80+ in age. The wide range of educational background, intelligence, auditory ability, visual ability, cognitive functioning, attitude toward learning and ability to recall constituted learning deterrents and were major considerations in the presentation of material. Those who could not see well or hear well sat at the front of the class. However, the teacher soon discovered that writing larger and speaking louder were not adequate solutions. Some could not see the contrast between the chalk and the blackboard. Several varieties of chalk were purchased until one soft variety was found whose impressions stood out clearly enough to be deciphered by those with impaired vision. Flash cards of white oak tag and written with a thick black magic marker were read more easily than material written on the blackboard. There was similarly no easy solution for people with auditory dysfunction. Those who wore hearing aids "couldn't stand" loud talk. Their tolerance range was limited and they were very sensitive to peripheral sound. Trial and error produced the best place for each person to sit considering his/her particular set of circumstances. Accent and pronunciation presented a good deal of controversy. Although all the students were familiar with Ashkenazic, there existed a variety of pronunciations based on whether the person came from Lithuania, Galicia, Russia or America. The Sephardic pronunciation was, therefore, decided upon so that some uniformity could be achieved. From that point on any student who had difficulty learning blamed it on Sepharadit. It became necessary to convert to Ashkenazit and to recite each new word in a variety of accents. This pleased the students and the teacher was happy to oblige.

Ability to learn and assimilate new material was difficult. There is growing data to suggest that while the capacity to learn does not decline, older people do not learn as quickly as younger age groups.<sup>4</sup> Over the past year it has

<sup>4</sup> Diana Woodruff and David Walsh, "Research in Adult Learning: The Individual," *Gerontologist*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (1975).

been rewarding to observe the group's acceptance of this limitation. They seem to have placed it in the perspective of the diminution of many skills common amongst old people. Slowly but consistently, we have noted the retention of new vocabulary; the recall of much stored away knowledge; and a change in focus from the fear of forgetting to the joy of learning.

## Methodology

### 1. *The Classroom*

Because the Home is an interconnected, multi-edified structure with living areas distributed both vertically and horizontally, considerable thought was given to the location of the class. In its one year history, it has had three "homes." The synagogue was first selected because traditionally a *bet hamidrash* is a house of study. As the days became shorter, the time of the class (3:30 p.m.) conflicted with the afternoon prayers and the class was moved to a central, rather heavily trafficked lounge. Although in this instance there was a compromise of privacy, there was at the same time a gain in enrollment. Several residents who were not prepared to make a definite commitment (rather common among institutionalized aged) to join the group, did in fact start to participate as a result of "just passing by." After a few months, due to constructions, the lounge became unavailable and the group was moved to its present location: the In-Service Classroom. Although somewhat out-of-the-way this room has many advantages. It has prior legitimacy as a place of serious education because it is used for staff training. In addition, the lighting, furniture and design of the room are all geared to maximizing instruction and learning. The residents have helped each other in finding room and fortunately attendance has not suffered as a result of the move.

### 2. *Teaching Materials*

From the start, it was clear that the group had more than academic goals which needed to be met. In addition to their acquisition of knowledge, it was hoped that the participants would derive emotional and spiritual satis-

faction. For this reason, the curriculum gradually turned away from conversational Hebrew and was directed toward the *Siddur* (daily prayer book), the *Mahzor* (holiday prayer book), the *Hagaddah* (Passover Seder book), the *Humash* (the Bible), and holiday observance. Each lesson is a self-contained unit. This enables the easy absorption of new members. On occasion, the units while self-contained, will deal with the same theme for up to three weeks.

There are no established texts or curricula for this type of class. Each of the students is provided with a pocket-folder which serves as a notebook. Each week a xeroxed lesson of two or three pages written in large print in Hebrew, English and transliteration is distributed to the students. The xeroxed lesson contains a Hebrew sentence or paragraph taken from one of the above mentioned sources. The passage is transcribed in linear fashion with translation and transliteration. This material is frequently supplemented by a homework sheet for the more advanced students and an English text which elaborates on the subject material of the specific lesson, e.g. background on the laws and symbols of various holidays.

### 3. Procedures

The basic philosophy of the Ulpan method of instruction was modified to suit the needs of this unique student body. The structure of each lesson is repeated weekly. Repetition and routine seem to bring optimum results. Before the students arrive, a Hebrew message is written on the blackboard which includes the date, a comment about the weather and the news of approaching special events (holidays, commemorations, etc.).

In addition, the key sentence of the day (the same as the xeroxed lesson), a list of review words and new vocabulary appear on the blackboard. When the class has assembled, attendance is taken with new vocabulary introduced to correspond to reasons for absences (i.e. sick, busy, visiting). The new material is distributed and read in unison. Since it is taken from familiar sources

(blessings repeated numerous times in the past), the words are easily recognized. Key words which are underlined are selected for translation. The root of each of these words is identified and lists are made of other words and expressions which stem from the same root. For example, if the key word is *bracha* (blessing), the following are added: *baruch* (blessed), *barach ha ba* (blessed is he who approaches), *baruch ha shem* (blessed is the name of God). Frequently derivatives are familiar idiomatic expressions which are part of the vocabulary of Jewish life.

Illustrative of the students' journey from the known to the newly acquired was the lesson on the root *kadesh* which means to sanctify through separation. From past experiences, the residents knew that *kadosh* means holy; that *kaddish* is the prayer recited following the death of a member of the immediate family; and that *kiddush* is the prayer chanted over the wine prior to a Sabbath or holiday meal. When they learned that all three words stemmed from the root *kadesh*, they were able to appreciate the true significance of the *kiddush* which separates the every day from the holy day. Similarly, a new understanding emerged for the world *kaddish*. When faced with the inevitability of death, the Jew by repeating the *kaddish* chooses to separate and sanctify himself by proclaiming the majesty and magnitude of God. The integration of this new knowledge enhanced the students' religious experience and created a moment of exaltation for the entire group.

### 4. The Teacher

Regardless of age, subject matter, or the teaching arena, a key factor to the instructional situation is the teacher.<sup>5</sup> The teacher that was selected for this model is an experienced educator with twenty years of teaching experience. The fact that she is trilingual: fluent in English, Yiddish and Hebrew, is a distinctive advantage. It enables

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Rindskoff and Don C. Charles, "Instructor Age and the Older Learner," *Gerontologist*, Vol. 14, No. 7 (1974).

her to respond to the students with enthusiasm in whatever language they happen to use. The students, in turn, feel comfortable with her because they share common attributes. As a woman in her mid-fifties, the students respect her for her life experience and do not feel competitive or threatened as they might if she were one of their contemporaries. Her willingness to share vignettes of her personal life in addition to her competence and instructional style further enhance her appeal to the group. We feel that acceptance of constraints, insight, patience and creativity are essential ingredients of an instructor for older learners.

### Response of Students

While motivations for joining the class varied, the overwhelming response to the results has been positive. Attendance has been good and the level of enthusiasm, high. The residents have been excited about retrieving knowledge and experiences long forgotten as well as about learning new skills. Several have indicated that attending synagogue has become more meaningful because they now have a better understanding of the prayers. For many, learning Hebrew is a source of pride and a reaffirmation of their ties with the State of Israel. Although often frustrated by not being able to remember everything, the students find that the intellectual stimulation is, in their words, "good exercise for the brain."

It is interesting to note that the warm and accepting atmosphere combined with a sound instructional method has enabled all the students to feel comfortable despite their previous knowledge or level of mental functioning and orientation.

One student whom the others refer to as the *altintchke* ("the old lady"), because she is closer to 95 than to 85, frequently wanders in late and sits in class not quite sure of what is taking place. During the middle of one session, at the mention of the word *Kislév*, the current month, her expression changed and she began a litany of each month of the year pronouncing each one accurately and in the correct order.

When she finished, tears of joy welled up in her eyes and she radiated with a sense of accomplishment and new-found dignity.

### Implications

This paper has demonstrated that if properly motivated and structured, the institutionalized aged are willing to involve themselves in educational pursuits. The milieu must, however, be one in which the emphasis is on active participation of each member rather than on evaluation of performance. The removal of stress and specific time requirements as well as the positive reinforcement of accomplishments all aid in making the older person feel at ease in the classroom. We feel that the reluctance of the aged to study would be greatly overcome if the "seeds of lifetime learning would be sown at the pre-school level so that a child may look forward to a life of educational experiences continually adapted for a particular life style."<sup>6</sup>

A key factor in the growth and development of our program was the firm commitment of the Home to "adding life to years." Credit must be given to the staff who listened, heard and acted upon the expressed need of a small group of residents. The encouragement and recognition given by staff to both the group and the teacher have inspired them to strive for even greater levels of achievement. As a result of this positive experience, the residents have requested classes in Yiddish, literature and Bible. Plans are now in motion to develop a "Senior University" which will offer courses in a variety of subject matter and will formalize the educational program. Our model has indeed demonstrated that "man's potential for change and growth is much greater than we are willing to admit and that old age should be regarded not as an age of stagnation but as the age of opportunities for inner growth."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps our project can become a pilot which will be used to light new fires throughout the Jewish community.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth B. Weg, "Educational Intervention and Gerontology: An Integration," *Gerontologist*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (1975), p. 450.

<sup>7</sup> Heschel, *op. cit.*