

Loving Hebrew

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When my son Jeremy was young, he would often corner people to share his favorite joke.

Maybe you were one of his victims.

If someone who speaks two languages is called bilingual and someone who speaks three languages is called trilingual, what do you call someone who only speaks one language?

The answer: An American.

Lacking the motivation of those from other countries, we tend to be pretty provincial in our language expertise. If we are born here, and our parents were born here, then even if we studied Spanish or French, or nowadays Japanese or Chinese in high school, we are unlikely to be fluent in another language, or even able to express ourselves well enough to truly communicate.

And so it is not without reason that someone confronted me, right here in this building with the challenges, “Look, rabbi, even the Catholics have abandoned Latin, what’s with all this Hebrew?”

In truth Hebrew is a losing battle in many ways. While in the 1920’s America was a center of Hebrew study and Hebrew poetry, by mid-century Hebrew in America was in decline and today there is only one published Hebrew poet in America, Robert Whitehall-Bashan, and he lives in Texas. The most famous and perhaps only notable American Hebrew poet Gabriel Priel died in 1933.

In addition, college language programs, which used to contribute to greater Hebrew fluency as compared to learning to read in Hebrew school, are dwindling as our focus in higher education turns to STEM. Those Jewish students who do chose to study a language are likely to see Arabic as more useful than Hebrew.

The difficulty of learning Hebrew is perhaps expressed best in the Spanish equivalent of the English saying, “It’s all Greek to me”. In Spain, as you might guess, they say, “It’s all Hebrew to me”. Many of us get as far as decoding the letters and then give up.

One of the interesting things I learned in looking into Hebrew in America is that there is a history to calling midweek lessons in Hebrew, Hebrew school. I hadn’t realized that Hebrew school developed totally separately from the Sunday school, program- for that one, we can thank or blame, Rebecca Gratz, in the early 19th century. Sunday school was taught in English at Temple and covered history and theology. The first Hebrew schools were efforts of American Hebraists and were indeed to teach the Hebrew language. They were not attached to synagogues nor did they teach prayers. They were organized by Jewish secularists, who saw the Hebrew language as an important aspect of Jewish national identity. They were definitely not the old-fashioned cheder but were part of the then popular ivrit beivrit, Hebrew in Hebrew, movement which some of us may have experienced in Jewish day school back in the day or at Camp Mossad or Camp Ramah.

But the Hebrew schools were hard to maintain and so with the suburbanization of the American Jewish community in the 1950’s they were taken over by synagogues where they have become something totally different. Just a very few hours per week, Hebrew school today stresses reading and prayers, preparing students for Bar and Bat mitzvah. Given the very limited

amount of time dedicated to the study, it is hard to do more, though this year Rabbi Schwartz and Cantor Felder-Levy have recreated our Hebrew school curriculum to include Hebrew through movement and music, which we hope will enhance our students' experience. Still, if students want to really converse in Hebrew, they will have to continue their education in Hebrew language post Bar or Bat Mitzvah at college or into adulthood.

So given that Hebrew is difficult to master, that it is the spoken language of just a small percentage of our local community, mostly Israelis and their American children, given that other religious communities have relinquished their ties to foreign languages in America, why do we persist with the Hebrew?

The best answer I have heard is that "Hebrew is a Memory Palace." As our Adult B'nai Mitzvah students will tell you, even just a little more Hebrew, connects you profoundly with our people and our heritage. Every word in Hebrew is built from a three letter stem and is connected to a whole family of words. And so every word has layers of meaning and is itself a node of connection to many different allusions, thoughts and images. Learning some Hebrew and using some Hebrew in the synagogue can add meaning even if true proficiency is not achieved.

Hebrew is also a connection to our past. We are not just contemporary Jews, or the descendants of over 200 years of Reform Judaism, or almost 400 years of Jews in America. We are part of a heritage that goes back to the early bronze age, and the Hebrew language in all its permutations, Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, Philosophical- are all part of that history and are all comprehensible one to the other. One scholar wrote: "languages are horizontal, (in the connections they can create) but Hebrew is also vertical." A speaker of modern Hebrew can

still read the earliest Hebrew of the Bible, perhaps not with 100% comprehension, but with a feeling of connection.

We like to tell our Hebrew school students- wherever you go there's always someone Jewish- and guess what, every synagogue you ever step into, will recite Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. In a world where travel is available to us, the horizontal connection can also be enriching.

There is also Israel, home to what is now the largest Jewish community in the world. Scholar Naomi Sokoloff, in suggesting that Hebrew is a state of mind, notes that one can come to it through translations of contemporary novels or non-fiction written in Hebrew. One can enter it through movies in Hebrew with subtitles, you can even go on youtube and watch Hayisraelim Baim- which is easily as funny and topical as the Daily Show or Full Frontal with Samantha Bee. It will give you a broader perspective on what Israelis are thinking. Or sign up for the streetwise Hebrew or other podcasts and catch up on what's happening today.

Sarah Bunin Benor, a young scholar at the Hebrew Union College who has spoken at Shir Hadash, urges us to aim for "smatteracy", her word for our membership in a Hebrew oriented metalinguistic community. She stands against those preaching doom and gloom by pointing out that we are not the first Jewish community to be weak Hebraists. Ezra was forced to translate the Torah into Aramaic for those who returned from the Babylonian Exile. Maimonides wrote his Moreh Nevuchim, Guide for the Perplexed, in Arabic so it could be understood by his readers, and even Rabbi Modechai Kaplan, a great scholar, proto-feminist and professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, used to have anxiety attacks before he was scheduled to give a

talk in Hebrew. Many Jewish communities throughout history were not comfortable with “spontaneous language production”, yet they didn’t lose touch with Hebrew altogether.

You don’t have to have a lot of Hebrew to identify the Hebrew in Abra Kadvrah- I will create (a- bara) as I speak (ke- dabrah) or read the Bible as Torah, finding translations that haven’t gone through Greek to Latin to English. A little Hebrew helps you to feel part of the congregation at prayer and smatteracy, even if that exposure to Israeli culture is in English will give you a sense of which journalists have a clue to what they are reporting on so that you can sort it out for yourself.

Baptists are known for the great preaching- and a Baptist preacher friend of mine gave me this advice for the holidays- talk about something you care about, make three points and end with a poem, and so I will.

It’s by Danny Siegel, but I totally identify.

I’ll tell you how much I love Hebrew:

Read me anything Genesis,

or an ad in an Israeli paper, and watch my face.

I will make half sounds of ecstasy,

and my smile will be so enormously sweet

you would think some angels were singing Psalms

or God alone was reciting to me.

I am crazy for her Holiness

and each restaurant’s menu in Yerushalayim or Bialik poem

gives me peace no Dante or Milton or Goethe could give.

I have heard Iliad's of poetry, Omar Khayyam in Farsi,
and Virgil sung as if the poet himself were coaching the reader.

And they move me

But not like the train schedule from Haifa to Tel Aviv

or a choppy un-syntaxed note from a student

who got half the grammar I taught him all wrong

but remembered to write with Alefs and Zayins and Shins.

That's the way I am.

I'd rather hear the weather report on Kol Yisrael

than all the rhythms and music of Shakespeare.