

A CHALLENGE TO MY COLLEAGUES: LET'S TRANSFORM HEBREW EDUCATION!

The current model for teaching Hebrew in part-time Jewish educational settings has been in place for decades; as a result, the expectations for what “Hebrew School” should look like is very strong! But with the decrease in days per week in recent years, less-than-consistent student attendance, and a host of other reasons, too many children reach sixth grade not remembering a number of letters or vowel signs. This makes it impossible to decode Hebrew with accuracy or fluency, and leads to unnecessary struggles and frustrations. Is it no wonder that many children don't feel compelled to continue their Jewish education into their high school years!

What would it take to transform our children's connections to Hebrew in our part-time Jewish educational programs? The Curriculum Department of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland is advocating four shifts in practice that together have the potential to better engage students and create more meaningful Hebrew learning. While designed with supplementary schools in mind, these recommendations also have implications for Jewish summer camp – both settings can more powerfully complement each other's focus on Hebrew.

1. **Let's start teaching Hebrew language the moment that our children enter our programs.** While part-time Jewish educational programs generally meet fewer days per week than a decade ago, there is still enough time to teach Hebrew language if instruction is approached consistently and appropriately. Fifteen minutes per session of Total Physical Response (TPR) – a kinesthetic language learning method used by many foreign language teachers – builds vocabulary and understanding.

As adapted for Hebrew education by Dr. Lifsa Schachter, TPR is called *Hebrew Through Movement (HTM)*. When taught every session in Kindergarten through Grade Six, *HTM* has the potential to truly engage part-time students in Hebrew learning. Contrast this to the spotty progress of students, with inconsistent attendance and stretches of days between sessions, who use a textbook with vocabulary lists to memorize and stories to piece together.

Hebrew Through Movement is a learning system that is socially-based – students participate together. Children absent on a particular day, or who enter the program in a later grade, or may simply not remember a particular command or vocabulary, are encouraged to look to their fellow classmates or teacher for clues. Moreso, as used in part-time Jewish educational programs, it has the potential to connect children to the meaning of blessings, rituals and prayers. Consistently, those teaching *Hebrew Through Movement* say that their children are excited by Hebrew and they are learning *language*, as compared to spending years learning and practicing letter-vowel signs combinations.

SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES:

- For the JECC's website that explains and explores *Hebrew Through Movement* see: <http://www.HebrewThroughMovement.org>. Included on the site are: an overview of the model, sample videos, a curriculum available for free download, and a link to the JECC's online learning seminar registration page (10 hours of online learning). A Pesach video demonstrates

the power of *HTM* to teach the language of rituals: <http://tiny.cc/j33hqw> (feel free to watch the first few minutes to see the warmup, and then fast forward to 9:00 on the timer to view the application).

- For a set of FAQs on Hebrew Through Movement, including info on the JECC's online learning seminar see: <http://curriculumjecc.wikispaces.com/Hebrew+Through+Movement>
- For a video showing the progression from the primary grades through grade sixth see: <http://tiny.cc/vr2hqw>.

CAMP CONNECTION:

Hebrew Through Movement is easily used in summer camps, creating an interesting synergy for children who participate in both kinds of educational programs.

2. **Let's focus on print pre-literacy skills.** Traditionally, early print literacy has been introduced by offering children coloring pages of the *alefbet* or by spending a year or two with a "pre-primer" textbook. But reinforcement is minimal from week-to-week, and children who are absent the day that the *Samekh* or *Shin* are taught, never really catch up.

However, Hebrew print literacy can be more authentically supported in a variety of developmentally appropriate ways:

- by labeling the learning environment with Hebrew words (דלת on the door, חלון on the window) and referring to them, for example, in *HTM* lessons.
- by helping children visually track the Hebrew of *t'fillot* by using large-scale posters and presentation software, and
- by using the power of *Hebrew Through Movement* to learn and reinforce letters and vowel signs.

SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES:

- For premade room labels, download this file from the JECC Teacher Center: <http://tiny.cc/xlnmqw>
- For *t'fillah* posters, with the Hebrew text divided according to natural phrasing, sign into the JECC Teacher Center's catalog <http://tiny.cc/rmnmqw> or contact the Teacher Center Director, Ronna Fox (rfox@jecc.org)
- For an overview of the use of *Hebrew Through Movement* in developing print literacy, see the unit beginning on page 123 in the no-cost curriculum guide posted at the bottom of www.HebrewThroughMovement.org

CAMP CONNECTION:

Locations and buildings around camp can be referred to and visually labeled with their Hebrew name and, as appropriate, camp “shticks” could be complemented by Hebrew posters or signage.

- 3. Let's connect students to the prayers of our people through consistent chanting of Hebrew prayers and spirituality-stretching-exercises, beginning with our youngest classes.** Most adults don't read/decode the prayers when in our worship services - they've learned the words well enough to recite the Hebrew, and then can follow along in the *siddur*. Building on the logical advantage of learning a language from sound-to-print, children's ability to recite, sing, or chant prayers, enables them to better decode.

In addition, teachers and *t'fillah* leaders (clergy, educators, songleaders and others) work hard at teaching children *about* prayers, but they don't necessarily touch the hearts of our children. Some Jewish educators across the nation have developed expertise in engaging children's spirituality, but their work is still in progress.

SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES:

- For a few curricula that address *t'fillah* differently from the normative textbooks see:
 - <http://jecchebrewprayer-shma.wikispaces.com/>
 - <http://jecchebrewprayer-vahavta.wikispaces.com/>
 - <http://jecchebrewprayer-avotimahot.wikispaces.com/>

- For a wiki, a website and a book that help engage children's spirituality see:
 - WithAllOurHearts.wikispaces.com - The site is designed as “give and get” – educators are encouraged to “give” by posting ideas for enriching *t'fillot*, and they are allowed to “get” thoughts offered by colleagues. To date, the site has received very interesting, but minimal postings.
 - <http://davenspot.blogspot.com> - Albeit written by an Orthodox day school educator, this has interesting thoughts applicable to part-time Jewish educational settings.
 - *Karov L'chol Korav, For All Who Call: A Manual for Enhancing the Teaching of Prayer* (by Jeff Hoffman and Andrea Cohen-Kiener), Melton Research Center for Jewish Education. – This book has many engaging *t'fillah*-enhancing activities.

CAMP CONNECTION:

Empowering children to lead *t'fillot* is great in principle, but 8 year olds (or even 15 year olds) don't have the maturity to lead others in true Worship experiences. Sadly, bunks of children leading services share varying versions of, “I love my dog, I miss my cat, let's say the *Barkhu*.” On the other hand, clergy and educators in the camp setting bring expertise to worship experiences that could tap into children's growing spirituality, while building the language of *t'fillah*. Perhaps it's time for camps to switch their kid-led-model to one that has the potential to better grow spiritual connections to God and to the prayers of our People.

4. **Let's be brave enough to delay the teaching of Hebrew decoding/reading till a later grade** (grade 5 or 6). Admittedly, this is the most heart-stopping recommendation in the mix, but a movement is afoot to make this the norm in part-time educational programs. Schools that have already moved decoding out of grades 3 & 4 have been able to increase time and focus on Judaics. [Indeed, Problem-based learning or Project-Based learning have a chance to succeed because students can explore an issue for more than 40 or 50 minutes a session.]

What does it mean to teach Hebrew in the later elementary grades? If students have built vocabulary and concepts through the use of Hebrew Through Movement, and if they can recite/sing the *t'fillot*, they will have the aural and oral background to actually "read" Hebrew, instead of simply decode letters and vowel signs. They also will be more motivated to learn this skill – the language will literally mean something to them at this point. And for those who will be preparing for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the time pressure will also serve as a motivator.

SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES:

The JECC has developed a Hebrew decoding/reading program for older children that is moving out of its pilot phase into reality. Developed for technology (as compared to a textbook primer that has been retrofitted to the computer or online learning), it includes:

- Online "story presentations" – 13 units (24 total lessons), each focusing on a different tween who encounters Hebrew in his or her environment that s/he wishes to read. Guided by an older brother or sister, an adult, or parent, this story-based-tween learns the letters and vowel signs in a way that's guided by sound grammatical principles. These average 15 minutes of work.
- A hands-on activity that reinforces the learning of the story presentation. These average 15 minutes of work.

Moreso, the learning is one-on-one; students work with a "learning-facilitator" (a teen madrich, formal tutor, teacher, retired member of the congregation, or a parent) on the story presentation AND the hands-on activities. The 12ish hours of learning can be scheduled at the school, at home, or a quiet place in the community (e.g., a study room in a library). There's no hiding behind classmates, no possibility of the student's mind drifting off, and little chance of "missing the *Mem*" because of an absence - learning-facilitators consistently pick up the learning where the student left off.

For support in considering a shift in where and how decoding is taught, contact Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz, nmoskowitz@jecc.org.

While part-time Jewish educational programs could choose to engage in only one or two of these four shifts in practice, it's **the complementary nature of all of them that has the power to create change in student connections to, and knowledge of Hebrew in ritually-related settings.**

So, my colleagues, will you join me in building on what we know about language learning and together transform Hebrew education for the benefit of this next generation? Will **you** accept this challenge?

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