

Concrete Steps for Better Hebrew Learning

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I have worked on the practice of learning Hebrew in different settings over many decades. This is what I have learned about Hebrew in the supplementary school. It will be spelled out further in a forthcoming article in an issue of *Jewish Education*.

The primary issue is not time but motivation. I once visited a Sunday school in Moscow in the days when teaching Hebrew was illegal. Children came one day a week for several hours. They learned from untrained teachers with inadequate materials. Their Hebrew language achievements would put many day school children to shame. Later I said jokingly that the secret to effective Hebrew learning was to make it illegal. Closer to home, I have heard mothers say countless times, as I am sure will be familiar, that after many years of inadequate learning, somehow, weeks before the bar mitzvah, the child 'got it.'

I know of one school in New York which has the children spend their first years in rich experiential Jewish learning and only months before the bar/bat mitzvah introduces them formally to Hebrew print. They all perform excellently on the big day.

Given all the meta issues including lack of motivation, lack of meaning, and lack of a community that values Hebrew, we can make a significant impact on results if we take certain concrete steps.

- Provide lots of aural experiences around Hebrew prior to and while, exposing children to print. The normative sequence is from sound to print and not from print to sound. I find TPR (James Asher, *Total Physical Response*) especially productive. Children love it. They begin to make connections by themselves. It allows children to become familiar with a large vocabulary that they will later encounter in print. It doesn't require teachers with native proficiency.

And don't forget to include lots of singing and chanting of selected prayers.

- Be clear about the distinction among reading, decoding and reciting. This was pointed out long ago in a helpful article by Yosi Gordon in the first *Jewish Teachers Handbook*. When we read we are deriving meaning from printed symbols. When we decode we sound out previously unseen words. When we recite we repeat sequences we have sounded out previously many times. It is what most adults do in synagogues. Just check where the eyes are as they chant prayers. Reciting *ashrei* countless times does not transfer to untaught texts.

- Teach according to sound Hebrew grammatical principles. We should not transfer principles for teaching English reading to teaching Hebrew decoding in an unmediated way because of the significant differences in the two alphabets. Hebrew is a consonantal alphabet. Unlike English it has no letters that serve exclusively as vowel letters. At the same time it does include four consonants that sometimes function as vowels. The vowel signs serve as prompts but do not have independent sounds. I have written about this elsewhere and will post some of those resources on this site.
- Provide students with tools to be come 'word solvers.' Teach them how to break words apart into syllables.
- Provide many experiences that promote visual discrimination and matching symbols to sounds. Having individual children sound out words or phrases should be a very limited activity.
- Tell stories about Hebrew words and the Hebrew language that point to its richness and relevance. One great resource is *How the Hebrew Language Grew* by Horowitz.

One school that began to teach this way found that the children were learning more in two years than they had previously learned in five. This resulted in a revamping of the curriculum and the introduction of many new and rich activities. Another school that continues with TPR throughout the grades reports children making independent connections between the language they are experiencing and the language of the prayer based curriculum. And most important they look forward to Hebrew and find it fun.