

Over October 21-24, 2014, CASJE (Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education) convened a virtual conversation: *Teaching and Learning Hebrew: Let's Talk about It*. The conversation – in the form of a blogcast – brought together educators, researchers, and funders with a shared interest in Hebrew language education. The goal was to identify ways that applied research could contribute to the development of teaching and learning in this field.

The original blogcast can be found at CASJE's website: <http://casje.org/casts/teaching-and-learning-hebrew/>. We encourage you to visit the site and add additional comments to the conversation. Extracts from the conversation are collected here.

## 1 Why Hebrew: What is the most important goal for teaching/learning Hebrew in Jewish Day Schools?

To enable students to access the liturgy and participate in Jewish rituals and services.



**Vardit Ringvald** I view the acquisition process as made up of powerful acts that enable learners to make the language part of who they are ... Using this tool in Jewish education can create powerful venues for strengthening students' identities and opening the door to their own culture and their own people.

**Rena Dorph** From a practical standpoint, competence (a.k.a. proficiency) in Hebrew language is a critical gateway to engagement in Jewish life and learning, enabling full participation in Jewish cultural life.

**Rena Dorph** My passion for Hebrew(s) is fueled by the joy and meaning that Jewish living and learning bring to my life and the role that Hebrew(s) proficiency plays in allowing me to participate in it.

**Sharon Avni** Learning Hebrew can be seen as a form of socialization into Jewishness/Judaism.

To open, for students, the world of contemporary and historical Jewish texts for study and learning.



**Rena Dorph** Hebrew language unites Jews across time and space.

**Naomi Stillman** I love the sound and the feel of Hebrew words as I hear and say them. I get a thrill from understanding a thousand-year-old text, and knowing that if I met its author we would be able to communicate.

**Naomi Stillman** The intellectual satisfactions of Hebrew are many. I savor the poetry and beauty and logic (yes, really) of the language, the way all the historical layers of the language intertwine to produce a living, modern language.

To foster a connection for young American Jews with Israel and Israelis



**Naomi Stillman** I am proud of (sometimes) passing as an Israeli when I speak Hebrew with friends, family, and strangers on the street. The emotional punch comes from connection to Jews and Judaism and Israel, and from a sense of pride and competence.

**Elli Fink** One of the things I love about Israel is the vibrancy and intensity of debate within its culture, religion, and politics. That is simply not coming through in English.

# Thinking Differently About Hebrew

## 2 What factors most constrain/inhibit the learning of Hebrew by 21st century American Jews (or Jewish day school students)?

The broader culture:  
Indifference in American culture to learning other languages and studying other cultures



**Elli Fink** Jews are part of a broader culture that simply does not value multilingualism and has grown to expect everything worthy of consumption to be made available in English. Acquiring a language is simply not deemed worthy of the commitment of time, money, and intellectual energy that it demands.

**Naomi Stillman** It is difficult to articulate a compelling purpose for knowing Hebrew to students, parents, teachers, and school administration. Not only are the humanities in general suffering in our STEM-dazzled educational world, but Hebrew in particular has no shine. Arabic, OK. That will come in handy for politics and international commerce. The same for Chinese. But everyone knows that even the most successful Israeli entrepreneurs start their start-ups in English!

Jewish culture and society:  
Changing attitudes to Israel and Zionism, alongside a historic disdain for Hebrew in many sections of the Jewish community



**Naomi Stillman** The change in attitude towards Israel and Zionism among American Jews. Jews who are ambivalent, antagonistic, or merely apathetic to the Zionist project are unlikely to see Hebrew as a key value.

**Naomi Stillman** Generations-old burden of disdain towards Hebrew education and teachers among many American Jews. The negative depiction of the Hebrew school teacher in the Coen brother's 2009 film *A Serious Man* is a painful but familiar example of this phenomenon.

Learning challenges:  
Psychological factors that work against students feeling confident and capable of learning Hebrew



**Rena Dorph** A critical factor/force in this discussion is the affective soup that an individual brings to his/her engagement Hebrew(s). Is she excited to speak Hebrew? Does he feel a lot of pressure because he knows how important it is to his mother? Does she love languages? Is he planning a trip to Israel? Does she resent being in Hebrew school? Does he long to understand the words in traditional Jewish liturgy and text? Does she feel incompetent? Is he anxious because he doesn't understand what people are saying to him? Is she motivated to speak to a loved one who is Israeli? And so many more.

**Elli Fink** Language is a means of communication. Mastering a language means acquiring the ability to communicate content that cannot otherwise be communicated or with a set of people with whom one cannot otherwise communicate effectively. Unless someone feels that they can be enriched (economically, culturally, religiously, socially) by that content or by that group of people, there will be no motive to acquire that vehicle of communication.

# Thinking Differently About Hebrew

## 3 What kind of research will be most useful to the field of day school education?

### Why Hebrew? What Hebrew?

What are the purposes for learning Hebrew? What do North American Jews think about the value of learning Hebrew? What is their motivation? What is their “baggage”? How, for example, do people’s views about being Jewish and their views on Israel fit into their thinking and feeling about the value of Hebrew?

“ *Vardit Ringvald* I agree that there is an urgent need to research the relationship between Hebrew language and identity — A big question that will allow us to understand the role of Hebrew within the Jewish life in North America and will help to shape the field of the teaching and learning Hebrew.

### How will we teach?

What pedagogical approaches to teaching Hebrew are most effective with which students under what conditions? (How does the teaching and learning of Hebrew relate to what we know about the teaching and learning of other second languages?)

“ *Naomi Stillman* But we don’t know what works best to motivate the unmotivated. We could consider researching some concrete “interventions” – for example, do Hebrew films and/or songs advance Hebrew learning? While it will be hard to separate the motivational effect of an intervention from its strictly educational effect (i.e. did a student’s Hebrew improve because visiting Israel motivated her to study harder back home, or because she actually acquired lots of new words in Israel?), we can learn a lot from “experiments” like this.

*Vardit Ringvald* Without understanding if and how Hebrew language indeed shapes the emotional and intellectual growth of our learners or how Hebrew proficiency impacts their Jewish beliefs and behavior— we will not be able to create the best pedagogy to teach it — as well as to shape the ideal Hebrew language educator.

### When Hebrew?

What is our theory of learning, and language development, related to Hebrew language learning in North America? What are the implications of that theory for Hebrew language educational practice? What role does the emotion and belief (of learner, of family, and of community) play in this theory of learning?

“ *Sharon Avni* What are the trajectories of Hebrew learning that individuals experience? How do trajectories of Hebrew learning work in relation to how a person develops as a Jew? Can we somehow capture these lifelong trajectories across different contexts and better understand how these multiple points of exposure and interest work with each other?

*Sharon Avni* Hebrew language learners who are not English monolinguals. We know that many of our students are emergent English learners (i.e., learning English as a second/third language) and may speak/use another language at home (e.g., Russian, Spanish and many others). We need to know more about how these students learn Hebrew and how phonological, syntactic and orthographic knowledge of other languages are at play in Hebrew literacy development.

### Who will teach?

Who should teach Hebrew? What are the essential qualifications of an effective teacher of Hebrew? Does this vary with the setting? Can non-fluent Hebrew speakers teach Hebrew language? If so, how? What kinds of professional development for teachers facilitate positive outcomes for students?

“ *Naomi Stillman* We have learned a lot, and know the many constraints on growing a robust pool of effective, devoted, and professional Hebrew language teachers ... Research questions could include how to encourage individual teachers and groups of teachers to invest in their own professional development and what types of professional training, development and mentoring are most effective and efficient in an environment which is often unfriendly to such sustained efforts.