LET’S STOP CALLING IT HEBREW SCHOOL

Rationales, goals, and practices of Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools

By Sarah Bunin Benor, Netta Avineri, and Nicki Greninger
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Although the official name of a part-time Jewish education program might be “Religious school,” “Limud,” or the like, some persist in calling it “Hebrew school.” This leads to an expectation that students will graduate with speaking ability in Hebrew and a perception that the schools are failing in their primary task. This study investigated the what, how, and why of Hebrew education in these settings.
Webinar Overview

- Background
- Methods of the Study
- What, How, and Why of Hebrew Education
- Satisfaction & Goals
- Helping & Hindering Factors
- Recommendations
- Q & A / Discussion
Background

- The vernacularization of Hebrew in Israel and the presence of Israelis in the U.S. has led to changes in how Jews understand “Hebrew” and the goals of Hebrew education.
- Historically part-time Jewish schools had more contact hours and were able to focus on Hebrew proficiency (Ivrit b’Ivrit: Benderly Boys).
- Bar/bat mitzvah became an important organizing principle in American synagogues and their schools.
Research Questions

How is Hebrew taught and perceived at American Jewish part-time schools?

• Rationales, goals
• Types of Hebrew and skills
• Teaching methods
• Stakeholders’ perceptions of success
Mixed Methods Study

Data Collection (pre-COVID-19):
- Fall 2018: 20 expert interviews, survey of 519 school directors
- Spring 2019: Subsample of 8 schools representing diversity in denomination, region, size, approach:
  - Surveys of students, parents, teachers, and clergy
  - Classroom observations in those schools +4 more

Data Analysis:
- Statistical analysis of quantitative data
- Interpretive analysis of qualitative data
Observations and constituent surveys
Approaches to Hebrew language education

Communication
- Speaking
- Listening
- Writing
- Reading

Ritual participation
- Decoding
- Recitation
Approaches to Hebrew language education

Communication
● Speaking
● Listening
● Writing
● Reading

Ritual participation
● Decoding
● Recitation

Modern Hebrew

Textual Hebrew
Metalinguistic Community


- **Beliefs** about language
- **Personal connection** to language
- **Affective relationship** with language
- **Valuing** language
- **Knowledge of** language
- Focus on what is happening
Ethnolinguistic Infusion

Benor (2019) Exposure to linguistic elements:
- vocabulary
- songs
- signs

Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada (Canagarajah 2013)
Approaches to heritage language education

Communication
- Speaking
- Listening
- Writing
- Reading

Ritual participation
- Decoding
- Recitation

Metalinguistic Community & Ethnolinguistic Infusion

Individual

Group

Language
Part-time Jewish schools

Communication
- Speaking
- Listening
- Writing
- Reading

Ritual participation
- Decoding
- Recitation

Metalinguistic Community & Ethnolinguistic Infusion

Individual

Group

Language
Findings
WHAT’S BEING TAUGHT?

- Jewish Holidays and Lifecycle Rituals
- Jewish Values/Ethics
- Hebrew - Reciting Prayers
- Torah Studies
- Hebrew - Decoding
- Prayers - Meaning or Themes
- Israel
- Jewish History, Historical Figures, Holocaust
- God/Theology
- Hebrew - Conversational
- Diaspora Communities (besides U.S.)
Diversity in approach to Hebrew

Less Hebrew-rich
Decoding
Textual Hebrew

More Hebrew-rich
(+) Conversation
(+) Modern Hebrew
Most schools

- Recognize that proficiency is unlikely in the limited hours they have
- But expose students to routinized elements of Hebrew in fun, communal ways
Most schools: Hebrew infusion

- Hebrew songs
- Hebrew signs
- Using and teaching Jewish life vocabulary
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Conversation, comprehension: less common

- Teacher: “Modern conversational Hebrew is not the primary goal — the primary goal of our program is to educate the students in Hebrew that will allow them to pray with other Jews and to succeed at their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs.”
Bar/bat mitzvah

- Prime motivator for many families to participate in Jewish education
Bar/bat mitzvah

- Prime motivator for many families to participate in Jewish education
- Causes tension

Educational leader: “Bar/bat mitzvah is the third rail of Jewish education. I’ve heard it from many educators. It’s the big obstacle, but it’s also the big opportunity.”
Why Hebrew? Bar/bat mitzvah vs. other reasons

- Values Hebrew education for bar/bat mitzvah: Great or moderate extent
- Values Hebrew education for reasons other than bar/bat mitzvah: Great or moderate extent
Parents’ rationales for Hebrew use differ from what school directors expect.
Students generally express positive feelings about their school and learning Hebrew, and their responses suggest that schools are generally succeeding in affective goals more than school directors believe.

- 77% like or love the Hebrew education at their school
- 69% feel a sense of accomplishment about their Hebrew knowledge
- 63% hope to learn more Hebrew in high school, college, or beyond
- 53% think Hebrew is fun
All groups are generally satisfied with the school and its Hebrew education, but a bit less satisfied with the school’s Hebrew education.
Goals

Parents { }, Teachers { }, Clergy { }, and School Directors { }

- to a great extent
- to a moderate extent
- to a small extent
- not at all

RECITATION  DECODING  COMPREHENSION  CONVERSATION  WRITING  AFFECTIVE  READING TRANSLITERATION
- Recitation and decoding are more important than comprehension, conversation, and writing.
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• Affective goals - like associating Hebrew with Jewishness and feeling personally connected to Hebrew - are the most important for school directors, teachers, parents, students, and clergy.
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Affective goals - like associating Hebrew with Jewishness and feeling personally connected to Hebrew - are the most important for school directors, teachers, parents, students, and clergy.

School directors express less interest in some Modern Hebrew-related goals than parents and other constituents, perhaps reflecting their more realistic sense of what is possible with limited contact hours.
Helping factors

Factors that school directors, teachers, and clergy indicate as helping their schools achieve their Hebrew education goals
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- A small amount of gamified homework
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- Approach, especially #OnwardHebrew, Hebrew Through Movement
Hindering factors
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- Students’ and parents’ competing priorities, overscheduled lives, poor motivation
- Students not doing homework
- Shortage of teachers who are skilled, experienced, and able to speak Hebrew
- Unclear or conflicting goals
Encourage your community to stop calling it “Hebrew school,” except where Hebrew language proficiency is the primary focus.
SCHOOLS SHOULD

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Engage in collaborative visioning with all stakeholders about Hebrew education.
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

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- Make students’ connection to Hebrew an explicit goal. Infuse more Hebrew through fun activities, songs, and signs, and focus on building a Hebrew “metalinguistic community.”
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Offer multiple tracks or an enrichment option for families interested in conversational Hebrew.
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Nationwide and regional educational infrastructure should offer more funded online training for teachers, information sharing, and consulting and training for school directors.
Thank yous

- Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE)
- Hebrew at the Center
- Research & editorial assistants
- Graphic designers
- Full report
- eJewishPhilanthropy article
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Todah rabah!
תודה רבה!