

# Putting the Hebrew Back in Hebrew School:

## Why Hebrew Schools Don't Work And How We Can Fix Them

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"Never try to teach a pig to sing. It  
wastes your time and annoys the pig."  
"Primum non nocere."

### **1 Background**

- (1) Hebrew vs. Judaica

### **2 Two Axioms**

- (2) Do no harm.
- (3) Do not let students feel stupid.

### **3 The Problem**

- (4) It doesn't work: In Hebrew Education, there is "no correlation between correct pupil responses [and the] number of instructional hours per week." (BJE 1988:85)

- (5) Students hate it.
- (6) Students feel stupid.

## 4 Four Myths

- (7) “Reading”
- (8) Grammar (*dikduk*)
- (9) Liturgy
- (10) Modern Hebrew

## 5 Reading

- (11) Reading vs. pattern recognition:
  - (a) Reading converts text into meaning.
  - (b) Pattern recognition converts text into sound.
  - (c) Reading aloud makes reading harder, not easier (Magliano *et al.* 1999), (Rubin & Turano 1992); even though people might silently pronounce their words (Keller *et al.* 2003).
- (12) Even in a familiar alphabet, reading foreign words is different than reading native words. (Meschyan & Hernandez 2006)
- (13) Even Israelis may read English better than Hebrew! (Oren & Breznitz 2005)
- (14) Reading depends on comprehension. (That’s why transliteration is so hard to read.)
- (15) Pattern recognition is:
  - (a) boring.
  - (b) slow.
  - (c) not difficult.

## 6 Grammar

(16) Hebrew grammar is very difficult.

(17) For example:

- (a) מלך העולם vs. לעולם ועד
- (b) יוצר בראשית
- (c) The root א.צ.א:
  - i. יצא ("he left")
  - ii. מוציא ("brings forth")
  - iii. יציאה ("exodus")
- (d) The root ש.ד.ק:
  - i. קדוש ("holy")
  - ii. מקדש ("sanctifies")
  - iii. מקדשת ("betrothed")
  - iv. קדיש ("a holy prayer"?)
  - v. קידוש ("another holy prayer"?)
  - vi. קדשנו ("holy us!"? "our Kiddish"?)
- (e) Vowels:
  - i. בְּרָכָה
  - ii. בְּרָכוֹת
  - iii. בְּרֵכַת הַמְזוּן
  - iv. בְּרֵכוֹת הַבְּדֵלָה

## 7 Liturgy

(18) Liturgy is either:

- (a) simple; or
- (b) a difficult graduate-level course.

(19) Basic liturgy is boring.

## 8 Modern Hebrew

- (20) Learning a language requires:
  - (a) an hour or two a day.
  - (b) a good learning environment.
- (21) Modern Hebrew is different than Biblical/Rabbinic Hebrew:
  - (a) וְאַהַבְתָּ: “and you loved” (Modern Hebrew) vs. “thou shalt love”/“you shall love.” (Biblical Hebrew)
  - (b) נַפֶּשׁ: “soul” (Modern Hebrew) vs. “body”<sup>1</sup> (Biblical Hebrew)
- (22) Israeli children don’t understand the liturgy or the Torah.

## 9 Toward a Solution

- (23) Discard unrealistic goals.
- (24) Focus on real goals.

### 9.1 Goals:

- (25) Recognition of letters.
- (26) Mastery of prayers.
- (27) Anything else?

## 10 Three Solutions

### 10.1 Minimalist Solution

- (28) Teach the prayers through engaging age-appropriate worship.
- (29) Teach the alphabet in Grade 5.
- (30) That’s it!

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<sup>1</sup>More accurately, the physical aspects of life, including most notably “body,” “blood,” and “breath.”

### 10.1.1 Prayers

- (31) Choose the music very carefully.
- (32) Resist the urge to pontificate.
- (33) Obviously, pray in Hebrew.

### 10.1.2 Alphabet

- (34) There are only 27 letters (including the final forms), and a handful of vowels.
- (35) The alphabet can *easily* be taught in a month.
- (36) Consider a marathon-Hebrew day.
- (37) Tell kids they aren't old enough to learn the alphabet yet!
- (38) Practice reading on cognates.
- (39) *Do not* practice on nonsense words.
- (40) For evaluation purposes, have the students read an Israeli newspaper.

## 10.2 Additional-Material

- (41) Augment the Minimalist Solution with additional material *for the fun of it*.
- (42) If the material isn't fun, don't do it.
- (43) (Really, if it's not fun, don't do it.)
- (44) Suggestions for additional material:
  - (a) Spoken Hebrew.
  - (b) Hebrew songs.
  - (c) Reading without vowels. (This has other benefits as well.)
  - (d) Hebrew games. (This also has other benefits.)

### 10.3 **Ambiance**

- (45) Augment the Minimalist Solution with an ambiance of Hebrew:
  - (a) Hire Israeli staff.
  - (b) Put up Hebrew signs. (But make sure the Hebrew is correct.)
  - (c) (Did you double-check to make sure your Hebrew is spelled correctly?)
  - (d) Watch Israeli DVDs of popular movies.

## 11 **Resources**

- (46) Major textbook publishers.
- (47) Hebrew DVDs (and books): Steimatzky USA.  
<http://www.stmus.com>  
(But really you have to get these in Israel.)
- (48) Some fun Hebrew worksheets:  
<http://www.lashon.net/JMH/JoelHoffman/Resources>
- (49) Engaging worship music:  
<http://www.soundswrite.com>

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