

We are perplexed by the wonderful and the mysterious, and feel that we must give some explanation to the child, whereas the child needs no explanation—the wonderful and mysterious are realities for him.. As Schiller expresses it,

*" Und was der Verstand der Verstaendigen nicht sieht,
Das uebt in Einfalt ein kindlich Gemuet."*

Let us, to produce the best result, give the Bible to our children without apology, and trust to the divine spark, alive in all childhood, to give it the right illumination.

Character-Building and the Study of Hebrew

RABBI SAMUEL N. DEINARD

Reprinted from Yearbook, Vol. XXV
Central Conference of American Rabbis

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CHARACTER-BUILDING AND THE STUDY OF HEBREW

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If the aim of our religious school instruction is to develop character, let us bear in mind that the Jewish religious school is to cultivate *Jewish* character, that it is to make of the Jewish child not only a religious, God-fearing man or woman, not only an upright and patriotic citizen of our country, but also a loyal Jew or Jewess. For Judaism, even in its most liberal and progressive form, is more than a system of ethics, more than a belief in God and the divine governance of the world, more than "ethical monotheism." It is all that plus faith in, and loyalty to, Israel's historical mission, reverence for Israel's past, attachment and devotion to *Keneseth Yisra'el*, "the collective body of Israel."

Judaism implies, among other things, a deep and thorough Jewish consciousness, the consciousness of our descent from the hoary martyr-people of Israel, the consciousness of our peculiar history, the consciousness of the bond that links us to our remotest past and unites us with all our Jewish brethren. This consciousness properly nurtured and cultivated grows into the strong Jewish sentiment that characterizes the true, faithful Jew, the Jew whose spiritual life is enlarged and enriched by a just pride in Israel's past, a deep reverence for the memory of Israel's lights and leaders, heroes and martyrs, a strong attach-

ment to all our historical possessions, loyalty and love to everything in which the Jewish soul has found expression. That is the Judaism we must teach our children; that is the kind of character we must seek to develop in them.

How can the study of Hebrew be instrumental in bringing about this result? The child must be given to understand that Hebrew is taught in our religious schools because it is our holy tongue, holy in the sense that it is the language in which the Torah is written, in which the divinely inspired messages of the prophets are recorded, in which the Psalmists intoned their immortal songs of praise to God. It is also the language in which Israel has at all times poured out his soul in prayer to God, for even now in the most liberal synagogues certain Scriptural portions, certain prayers and responses, are recited in Hebrew. That is the sense in which Hebrew is to us indeed, *lashon qadosh*, a holy language, or as the Jerusalem Targum in one instance calls it *lishan beth qudsha*, "the language of the sacred House." I hope that we of the liberal school are not so prosaically rationalistic as to deny that, in the above given sense, Hebrew is to us, in very truth, a holy language, just as the synagogue is a holy place, and our sabbaths and festivals are holy seasons.

By teaching the child Hebrew we are developing in him reverence for things that are holy to us Jews.

But Hebrew, and the literature written in it, mostly of a religious character, are two of the strongest links that bind us to our past. The cultivation of Hebrew is in response to our duty and desire to carry on unbroken the chain of our historic continuity. The study of Hebrew cannot fail to develop in the child's character a sense of affiliation with our past, helping the mature child all the more strongly to realize his filial connection with our remotest ancestors. I cannot too strongly emphasize the necessity of cultivating in our children this sense of kinship with our past. *Habbitu 'el sur Khusavtem* "Look at the rock from which you have been hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence you are digged. Look unto Abraham, your father * * * " In that regard the study of Hebrew is of almost equal influence on the child's character as the study of Jewish history.

But Hebrew is also the bond that has always united and still, in a measure, unites all Jews of the dispersion. A study of Hebrew must awaken in the child a consciousness of Jewish unity, a sympathetic brotherly feeling for all our fellow-Jews, no matter in what clime they may dwell, or from what country they may hail. That this is one of the great desiderata in the education of our modern youth, who will question? How often do we meet Jewish young people now-a-days who consider the foreign Jews, especially such as come from countries of a lower level, or different mode of culture than our own, as entirely alien to them. I often wonder how our Americanized young people would feel and act in the presence of a congregation of swarthy Jews of Morocco or Yemen, or of the black-skinned Falashas, if such congregations were to spring up in our western communities. A knowledge of Hebrew, however, would at once supply a bond of sympathy between them and the most foreign looking and strangely acting Jews. The sense of Jewish unity must be cultivated in our modern youth.

The one thing that characterizes the religious thinking of our masses, wherever there is any religious thinking at all, is its prosaic, colorless rationalism. The guiding principle in all discussions is the question of utility; what is it good for? We are living in a utilitarian, so-called practical age, and we Jews too, are just what the spirit of the age and what our environment have made of us. All the more necessary it is that some romantic element be infused into the religious training of our children. Vague as this term "romanticism" is, it will yet, in a measure, convey my meaning to you when I use it in connection with the study of Hebrew, the cultivation of something that is ancient and holy, something that, although of no practical value in our practical age, is yet precious for its own sake, the cherishing of a religious family heir-loom. As a counter-irritant for our prosaic utilitarianism, it will prove of great influence upon the child's character.

I find something of Jewish character-building value in the familiarity, understanding and use of certain Hebrew words. I have in mind such words as *shalom*, *berakha*, *sedaga*, *rakhmanuth*, *'emeth*, *simkha*, *yom tov*. Of course, we can always find English

equivalents of them, more or less exact. And yet there is a peculiar flavor and relish about the Hebrew words that cannot but react Jewishly upon the child's mind, developing its sense for, and strengthening its sympathies with, things Jewish.

But more than that. A people's soul is imbedded in its language, aye, its vocabulary. Emerson has somewhere characterized language as "fossil poetry", upon which Trench comments as follows: "He evidently means that just as in some fossil, curious and beautiful shapes of vegetable and animal life, the graceful fern, or the finely vertebrated lizard, such as now, it may be, have been extinct for thousands of years, are permanently bound up with the stone, and rescued from that perishing which would have otherwise been theirs—so in words are beautiful thoughts and images, the imagination and the feeling of past ages, of men long since in their graves, of men whose very names have perished, these which would so easily have perished too, preserved and made safe forever * * * Language may be, and indeed is, this fossil poetry; but it may be affirmed of it with exactly the same truth that it is fossil ethics or fossil history. Words quite as often and as effectually embody facts of history, or convictions of the moral common sense, as of the imagination or passion of men".

The language of Israel which was the language of a people of a peculiar religious genius, the language used by men who were, to apply Wellhausen's phrase, "the virtuosi of religion," holds embedded the wealth of Israel's religious experience, religious ideals and aspirations, Israel's religious life. What an influence upon the Jewish child's character it would be if he were taught to appreciate the full connotations and associations of the Hebrew words above cited, if he learned that *shalom*, (peace) was the common form of salutation; that *berakha*, (benediction), was applied to the multitudinous formulas of prayer and praise in which the old ritual abounds, and which the Jew was to recite before every experience and every enjoyment, so that gratitude to God was the keynote of Israel's worship; that *sedaga* (charity) is primarily justice, for it is only justice we are doing in helping the poor; that *rakhmanuth* (compassion) is one of the Jew's characteristics who are called *rakhmanim bene*

rakhmanim; that *'emeth* (truth) primarily means that which is firm, secure, reliable, permanent, such being the character of truth; that *simkha* (joy) was to the Jew above all else religious joy on occasions of religious celebrations; that a religious festival was a *yom tov* (good day) a day well spent, and so forth. Will not this awaken a new admiration in the child for Israel's religious inheritance?

But the study of Hebrew will develop in the child an interest in Jewish culture in general. That such interest is very much to be desired in our rising generation cannot be questioned. The indifference of our young people to Jewish culture, and, especially, literary achievements of the past and present is well known and deplored on all hands. Those whose interest is still alive and keen in all matters of Jewish culture are mostly such as have in their younger days received instruction in Hebrew as part of their religious training. May we not perceive some relation between these two facts—a relation of cause and effect? Moreover, the two classic periods of Jewish culture in the history of our diaspora are the ones in which the cultivation of Hebrew was most intense; I mean the Spanish and the post-Mendelssohnian periods, including the Haskalah movement in East-European countries. All that is worth while in Hebrew and Jewish literature of the post-Talmudic era is, with rare exceptions, the creation of these two renaissance periods. And both periods were ushered in and characterized by an extensive and intensive study of Hebrew. I doubt not that the newly awakened zeal for the more scientific, systematic and methodical instruction in Hebrew in the newly organized Talmud Torahs in all our larger communities, especially the new logical method of *'ivrit be'ivrit*, while it may not result in creating a new Hebraic atmosphere, or in making Hebrew a spoken language in this country, will generate in the rising generation a love and loyalty to Jewish culture and to every new product and manifestation of the Jewish spirit. That surely is a consummation devoutly to be wished for by all of us.

To produce all these results would, to be sure, require a different course of instruction in Hebrew than is commonly afforded in our religious schools. The child should not merely

be taught to read Hebrew, but should acquire at least a sufficient knowledge of the language to be able to translate the prayers and the easier texts of the Bible. How this is to be accomplished is another problem. Let us in the meantime bear in mind that instruction in Hebrew is a great factor in the building of Jewish character, in cultivating loyalty to Jews and Judaism, reverence for our past, faith in our future, and love for our history and our culture.

'al yish'al 'adam sar'khav bilesheon 'arami, she'en mal'akhe hashareth makkirin bilesheon 'arami. The *mal'akhe hashareth*, (the ministering angels) the beneficent influences that make for the strengthening of Jewish character, do not recognize the speech of Aram, the speech of vulgar commercialism and utilitarianism, but favor the study of Hebrew as one of their helpful allies.

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