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LIFE IN EVERY LETTER: THE HEBREW ALPHABET AND JEWISH CONNECTION

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Introduction

Of all the ways into a rich and meaningful Jewish life, learning the Hebrew alphabet isn't necessarily the most obvious way to get started. Hebrew is an ancient language that reads right-to-left. It operates in a grammatical fashion that is completely different from the Germanic and Romance languages familiar in the West. Then there's the orthography: Hebrew consists of twenty-two letters (plus final forms), and is considered an "abjad" writing system, meaning that it is free of vowel markers and leaves some elements of pronunciation to the readers. Many b'nai mitzvah students will tell you that learning to read and pronounce Hebrew is the bane of their existence.

In spite of its difficulty, Hebrew has remained a focal point of Jewish peoplehood. Hebrew occupies a mythical place in the Jewish psyche–it is the language of the Torah, of liturgy, of poetry. Some have explained the Hebrew alphabet as a conduit for spiritual connection to the divine. It is used for gematria, the system in which each letter possesses a different numerical value. In calligraphy, Hebrew is elevated to artful expression. Jewish languages like Yiddish and Ladino are written in Hebrew letters. It is a language that has the power to enlighten and enliven.

The first Hebrew words I ever read were from the Sh'ma: *sh'ma yisrael adonai eloheinu adonai echad*. The Sh'ma is considered the watchword of the Jewish faith, the ultimate expression of Jews' connection with the source of life. For weeks leading up to my consecration ceremony at the start of my kindergarten year, I practiced reading those six words until I knew them inside and out. On the day of the ceremony all of us little five-year-olds were called up to the bimah, stood under an enormous blue and white tallit held by our parents, and recited the Sh'ma. On cue and in unison, we recited confidently, if haltingly, and received miniature Torah

scrolls to take home to pore over. Little did I know, this rite of passage was the start of many more years of Jewish life and learning. I was lucky; at my parents' insistence I learned the Hebrew alphabet from a young age. Beginning with learning the Sh'ma, I had a Jewish education that gave me a coherent narrative about how Hebrew fit into Jewish life. What follows in these pages is a capstone paper about those students who opt into learning Hebrew long after the age of five.

Throughout the pandemic I taught Hebrew decoding to adults at a congregation in Brooklyn. In Hebrew decoding, students learn to match the sounds of Hebrew with individual letters. The students who elected to learn with me ranged in age and gender, and some converted to Judaism while others never learned Hebrew decoding although they grew up Jewish. Students came from a wide array of backgrounds and pursued diverse careers. Their combined experiences inspired me to consider how Hebrew decoding fit into adult students' religious and spiritual lives. I became curious about the stories they shared with me in class and decided to explore further.

In the past, learning Hebrew decoding was a linear experience with clear goals beyond the actual alphabet. It was a means to progress into more difficult encounters such as Hebrew text study or conversation. But what if learning the alphabet could be seen as a transformative experience in itself, like it is for young children who learn the alphabet with the sweetness of honey to arouse their senses? I want to suggest that adults learning Hebrew decoding can have wide reaching, often unintended benefits when viewed from the same angle of teaching children. Why *not* drench little Hebrew letters in honey for adults to lick up? Why *not* posit the Hebrew alphabet as a robust enough curriculum for profound Jewish connection?

After I conducted interviews and surveyed previous scholarship (including classical texts), I hypothesized that adults who learn Hebrew decoding can form deeply meaningful attachment to their Jewish heritage. Just like the kindergartners reciting Sh'ma, adult students of Hebrew decoding learned together, reaching for what had previously been withheld or unknown to them. Whatever their motivation, whatever their goal, all were united in starting from *alef* as adults, and the Hebrew alphabet provided these students twenty-two letters which invited opportunity for a sweet exploration of many different paths to Jewish education.

In this capstone paper I will explore the following questions: What motivates an adult to learn Hebrew decoding? What unique advantages are there to learning Hebrew decoding as an adult? Once they have learned Hebrew decoding, what do they want to learn next, if anything? What impact does learning Hebrew decoding have on a person's relationship to Jewish peoplehood? And is learning Hebrew enough to produce a transformative experience that leads to even greater connection to Jewish heritage?

When I concluded the written portion of this project, I gave a workshop on Zoom to engage a wider audience and present my findings. The session took place on Monday, March 7, 2022 and lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. Over the course of the session I presented slides containing some of my most pertinent findings (see Appendix). At the start of the session I welcomed all participants and shared the genesis of this project. I explicitly invited interaction and encouraged the 22 participants to contribute to the conversation, and they did: aloud and in the Zoom chat. Certain comments arose that could precipitate further research into this topic. For example, what resources and curricula are available to Hebrew learners who specifically seek out a transformative learning experience? How do we understand the many variations of Hebrew (e.g., Biblical, Mishnaic, and Modern) in the context of learning the alef-bet?

The first part of the presentation showcased some of the theoretical frameworks I learned from and drew upon. These frameworks included modern thought as well as classical rabbinic literature. Then, I engaged the participants in a study of the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 104a. Special attention was paid to the fact that the passage opened in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Babylonian sages. I drew the connection from the concurrence of Hebrew and Aramaic in those days to the concurrence of Hebrew and English today. We spent time studying the Talmud's depiction of the children's interpretations of certain Hebrew letters, and concluded the session with a general discussion about Hebrew in the contexts of our lives.

Background & Conceptual Frameworks

If Jewish traditions were not experienced earlier, adulthood is as good a time as any to begin. While some adults might feel internal or societal pressures to know in advance exactly how Judaism fits into their lives, it can also be a great time to challenge preexisting beliefs and explore things that matter to them. Adult education or "lifelong learning" classes encourage that kind of thinking. Drawing on the work of several developmental theorists, Tickton Schuster puts it this way: "Identity formation–how each of us comes to define ourselves and the things that matter to us–is a continuing phenomenon."[1] It is natural for adults to desire ongoing Jewish learning, and the introduction of new skills such as Hebrew decoding is a feature of this ongoing discovery.

Anderson argues that, in general, language sustains people throughout their lives: "[language is] encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed."[2] The discussion centers on the role of language

[1] Diane Tickton Schuster, *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice*. (Millburn, NJ: Behrman House), 62.
[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Revised Edition. (New York: Verso), 154.

in the way people make meaning. With this view, nothing in a person's life travels with them over the years like language. In a Jewish context, Hebrew has the potential to be that language which accompanies a person through their life to give voice to the diversity of experience. Hebrew connects Jews to the past, present, and future.

Benor, Avineri, and Greninger discuss the idea of Hebrew as "flexible signifier," that is, Hebrew will mean different things to different students and therefore motivate individuals in different ways.[3] While one student might learn Hebrew decoding because it is the alphabet used by beloved relatives in Israel, another person might reach for the Mourner's Kaddish after the loss of a loved one. Someone attending a bat mitzvah or wedding in a synagogue might notice the Hebrew words in the service and the Hebrew art around the building. The array of connection points is not indicative of discord, but rather, evidence of the need to understand the variations in adult learners' relationships to Hebrew decoding. However, Avni contends there is no evidence that Hebrew is a guarantor of heightened connection to Jewish identity.[4] She suggests that *because* motivations behind Hebrew learning are "polysemous"[5] more scrutiny and policy changes should emerge in order to offer Hebrew learning programs more widely and ensure it as a tenet in the set of practices that shape a person's Jewish identity.

Children are normally compelled by their guardians to learn Hebrew–adults, on the other hand, are self-motivated. Each student comes to class with an array of different motivations and expectations, which might indicate how the material will be digested and integrated. In Tickton Schuster's research on Jewish adult education she utilizes Houle's matrix of understanding

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[3] Sarah Bunin Benor, Netta Avineri, and Nicki Greninger. 2020. Let's stop calling it "Hebrew school": Rationales, goals, and practices of Hebrew education in part-time Jewish schools. Washington, DC: Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education. https://www.casje.org/HebrewEdPartTime.

[4] Sharon Avni, "Hebrew as heritage: The work of language in religious and communal continuity," *Linguistics and Education* 23 (July 2012): 323-333.

[5] Sharon Avni, "Hebrew as heritage: The work of language in religious and communal continuity." *Linguistics and Education* 23:3 (2012): 323-333.

"student orientations."[6] [7] Some students may be goal-oriented, others activity-oriented, and still others learning-oriented. A fourth category, not found in Houle, is the student who is spiritually-oriented. As the findings will show, all orientations could be construed as spiritual. These orientations indicate what a student's primary or most salient reason is for taking the class. All orientations might show up in one classroom and may present in one individual student. In an adult Hebrew class, people with diverse viewpoints and life experiences converge and overlap across these different orientations.

The Hebrew text is inherently eternal, and learners who converge around it ensure it will remain so. From its inception Hebrew has traversed many continents along with the Jewish people. Hebrew flows like water in the fountain of wisdom. Works on the history, literature, and culture of the Jews supply the eternal conversation which is laced throughout time. Calling it the "third rail" of Jewish culture, Glinert argues that Hebrew powers Jewish religious and secular endeavors but the power has damaging potential.[8] Whether and how to teach Hebrew is a political choice as much as it is a linguistic one. But the Hebrew language promotes the creative expressions of the Jewish experience. What is supplied by the power of Hebrew is not as important as the fact that there is a supply, continuously providing twenty-two letters that are reshaped to yield ever-changing interpretations of tradition. Glinert argues that working with Hebrew for its own sake may be more of a "pleasure" than working with it over time to build "proficiency."[9] So regardless of a student's proficiency in Hebrew, participating in that learning may offer them a significant point of connection to Judaism and Jewish life. It need not be

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[6] Cyril Houle, *The Inquiring Mind*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961).
[7] Diane Tickton Schuster & Lisa D. Grant, "Adult Jewish Learning: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?" *Journal of Jewish Education* 71:2 (2005): 187-188.
[8] Lewis Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 7.
[9] Lewis Glinert, "Smashing the Idols: Toward a Needs-Based Method for Teaching Hebrew as Heritage," *Journal of Jewish Education* 65:3 (1999): 19.

perilous; so long as there is a proper mechanism to collect the current, the immense power of Hebrew can supply Jewish life with multitudes.

The satisfaction one can derive from tapping into Hebrew can satisfy the same nostalgic itch as eating Jewish foods and visiting Jewish museums. In her conception of nostalgia, Gross posits that what might be considered secular Jewish experiences such as eating a pastrami sandwich or visiting the Tenement Museum, when viewed through the lens of nostalgia, become religious experiences unto themselves. When Jews participate in secular experiences that make them feel their Jewishness, the result is a "consumable product and a religious experience."[10] Hebrew too can also be viewed as a consumable product to be enjoyed: students get a workbook, which they ingest and experience as Jewish religiosity. The experience of these things as nostalgia reproduces certain expressions of religiosity and may be characterized as such.

Inhabiting this framework may be further explored with the help of Jack Mezirow's pedagogical framework of transformative learning, defined as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference." Levisohn articulates that Jewish education can be what changes the perception of self in the world.[11] Adult Hebrew classes are one such offering that can be the topic of a transformative educational experience. The skills acquired in Hebrew class influence parts of the learner that are beyond any measure of proficiency. The experience of learning Hebrew chips away at prior modes of thinking about the subject and pushes a student deeper in the quest for understanding their life in context. In a related manner, Martin Buber considered education to be the means through which human beings achieve their creative urge. Adult learners of Hebrew, just as much as children, have the capacity to enjoy language learning as an expression of

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[10] Rachel B. Gross, "Feeling Jewish: Nostalgia and American Jewish Religion," *Crosscurrents* 71:1 (March 2021): 23.

[11] Jon A. Levisohn, "Theories of Transformative Learning in Jewish Education: Three Cases," *Journal of Jewish Education* 83:3 (2017): 212.

creative powers. Buber articulated this view in a 1925 address to an educational conference in Heidelberg:

> Man, the child of man, wants to make things. He does not merely find pleasure in seeking a form arise from material that presented itself as formless. What the child desires is its own share in this becoming of things: it wants to be the subject of this event of production.[12]

Buber's consideration of this creative impulse speaks to why that impulse lingers in adulthood past traditional schooling age. In the classroom environment creation happens constantly, as new material is digested and new horizons explored. This is all the more so, Buber reasons, when it relates to language:

> A good expression of this instinct is the way children of intellectual passion produce speech, in reality not as something they have taken over but with the headlong powers of utter newness: sound after sound tumbles out of them, rushing from the vibrating throat past the trembling lips into the world's air, and the whole of the little vital body vibrates and trembles, too, shaken by a bursting shower of selfhood.[13]

To learn the essentials of a new language in adulthood is the site of creation, much as it was for children. Yet there is a tendency to see second language acquisition in terms of its measurable and immediate applications.[14] Applied outcomes are desirable, but they may manifest

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[12] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*. (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2014): 85.
[13] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man,* 85.
[14] Maria S. Carlo and Ellen Skilton Sylvester, "Adult Second-Language Reading Research: How May It Inform Assessment and Instruction?" National Center on Adult Literacy, Philadelphia, PA. (October 1996).

long after the conclusion of class time. To understand Buber's educational ideals, it is helpful to use a transformative learning orientation. Such an orientation may be perceived in the *Aleph Isn't Tough* Hebrew book series, which also includes the titles *Aleph Isn't Enough* and *Tav is for Torah*.[15] The series implies that transformation of one's Hebrew knowledge is not difficult. But Hebrew is a Semitic language written right-to-left with a triliteral root system containing sounds like the uvular fricative <x> and multiple letters that make the same sound (e.g., sin/samekh and kaf/kuf). Add in adults' baggage about Jewish learning and Hebrew remains at arm's length for many Jewish adults.[16] In 2013, only 60% of the Jews by religion surveyed could read the Hebrew alphabet while just 24% of Jews of no religion could read it. Around 16% of Jews by religion and 4% of Jews of no religion could actually understand most or all of what they read in Hebrew, and it wasn't reported what percentage had textual fluency for reading Hebrew texts and law codes.[17]

Hebrew, when perceived as difficult, excludes potential learners who would otherwise sign up to learn it. The book series tries to lower the stakes and appease those learners who would learn but for the difficulty. On the other hand, the erasure of difficulty is certain to disappoint any student who uses the workbook. As noted above, learning Hebrew *is* tough, and claiming otherwise could be alienating. Furthermore, the implication of *Aleph Isn't Enough* is that there is always more to learn–a worthy statement in itself, but misapplied in this case. The endlessness of all there is to learn is intimidating in *Aleph Isn't Enough*. But what makes transformational learning so desirable is that what a person already knows is enough. They will probably continue to learn, so appreciation of *aleph* as enough would not hinder learning the rest

[15] Linda Motzkin, *Hebrew for Adults Series* (New York: URJ Press, 2000).
[16] Diane Tickton Schuster & Lisa D. Grant, "Adult Jewish Learning: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?" p. 187.
[17] "A Portrait of Jewish Americans." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (October 1, 2013) https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

of the alphabet. This process of learning and integration is a core tenet of transformative education.

This conception of the Hebrew letters appears in the realm of Jewish mysticism. The Hebrew alphabet has an extensive history in mystical Judaism.[18] More than just a practical means of communication, Jewish mystics regarded Hebrew as the building blocks of creation. In other words, just as computer code is all ones and zeroes, creation (i.e., the universe) is alefs and bets. A Talmudic treatment of Bezalel, the artisan par excellence who, as written in Exodus 31, created the tabernacle, reports his linguistic skill in the creation of such a sacred structure. The Talmud relates that Bezalel knew how to "join the letters with which Heaven and Earth were created."[19] From here the rabbis articulate that the wisdom stemming from such intimate knowledge with letters enables a person to create a work as important as the Tabernacle.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, it is related that when Moses appeared before God atop Mount Sinai God was putting the finishing touches on the Torah.[20] Those finishing touches were the crowns that adorned the letters, and God explains just how significant the detail of each letter would be to future generations. God transports Moses into the future where a certain Rabbi Akiva is teaching Torah to his students and attributing his thinking to Moses on Sinai–that moment when God tarried with revelation in order to complete each letter in its fullness, with crowns. Out of this conception of Hebrew's basis for all creation, the component words and letters are understood as the driving force behind so many rationales for Hebrew mysticism.[21]

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[18] Moshe Idel, "Reification of language in Jewish mysticism," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42-79.
[19] Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 55a.
[20] Babylonian Talmud Menachot 29b.
[21] Idel, "Reification of language in Jewish mysticism," 47.

In the study "The Pedagogy of Slowing Down," Kanarek identifies an important strategy in Jewish learning: slowing down.[22] Slowing down engenders an awareness that permits a much deeper integration of material learned. This goes beyond mere pedagogy; Kanarek argues for inclusion of this approach as a sort of cultural shift: "I came to understand that one of my larger teaching goals this summer was to provide an alternative cultural model, a model where success in learning was measured more by the content of what was said than the speed in which those answers were reached."[23] Although Kanarek's paper describes her experience teaching Talmud, the conceptual framework extends to the learning of, well, anything–and arguably to the adult Hebrew classroom. But slowing down did not necessarily alleviate the burden of learning something difficult. Kanarek outlined a rigorous four-pronged approach to teaching with the value of slowing down, the first of which is the notion of precision–not just in a word's meaning but in how those words are used to make an argument for one thing or another. Not satisfied with just knowing the answers, Kanarek expected her students to know the *how* and the *why* of their answers. In other words, their answers needed to be precise enough to explain the reasoning to her and the entire class, not to mention that student's future students.

The second element of the pedagogy of slowing down pertains to the practice of being open to multiple lines of interpretation. Never resigned to just one understanding of a text, the class is always encouraged to see things from multiple perspectives and to never be locked down to any one way of interpreting a text. This ties into the third prong, which is related to previous commentators of the text. In the case of studying Talmud, this would point to the *rishonim* and others. Inclusion of commentators and other resources for understanding the text more fully was

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[22] Jane Kanarek, "The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kollel". *Turn it and Turn it Again: Studies in the Teaching and Learning of Classical Jewish Texts*, eds. Jon A. Levisohn and Susan P. Fendrick, Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, pp. 128-157. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781618117700-008.
[23] Jane Kanarek, "The Pedagogy of Slowing Down," 131.

expected of the students in the pedagogy of slowing down. Students needed to put their answers in concert with those who may have studied and expounded on that same material. The fourth prong is the "big picture," in other words, finding an appreciation of what the study has yielded as having a lasting place in a person's life experience.

This capstone project helped me to see that what people described as secular or non-religious actually had very strong themes of religiosity and adherence to religious principles. One generation's made-up custom becomes the next generation's traditional practices. And so if all the former generations had the opportunity to be entered into the canon of Jewish memory then today's students of Judaism should have the same right. Learning the Hebrew alphabet is literally the ABCs not just of the Hebrew language but of the Jewish experience. Learning Hebrew is not just for following along in the prayer book, translating text, or speaking with Israelis. Knowledge of the alphabet system can provide a connection to Judaism that could be viewed as an end in itself.

Hebrew education need not be easy or even fully understood to garner the desired outcomes of transformative learning promoted by Buber and Levisohn. It starts with revising the title of *Aleph Isn't Tough* to *Alef* Is *Tough*, *And It* Is *Enough*! Short of that kind of revision to the landscape of Hebrew workbooks, it is left up to individual educators and students to view Hebrew learning as a playground for creation, celebrating the presence and attention to *alef* as enough for a rich Jewish experience in adulthood. What ensues in terms of that learning is inevitable. In the remainder of this paper we will meet several individuals who learned to decode Hebrew as adults for a variety of reasons.

Methodologies

To test theory I encountered in the background scholarship, I put out a call to adult Hebrew learners to share their experiences with me by way of an interview. I asked students in my Hebrew classes if they would participate, and I also asked my contacts to connect me with adult Hebrew learners they knew. In all, I interviewed nine people who ranged in age, gender, and past Jewish experience. The gender breakdown was seven females, one male, and one trans man. The youngest participant was 25 and the oldest was 72. Each interview took place on Zoom and was transcribed by Fathom, an in-app Zoom program. The software freed up my cognitive bandwidth to focus on conducting the interview. By the time I conducted my first interview via Zoom our country was 18 months into the coronavirus pandemic, so participants found Zoom easy and familiar to use. Some participants chose to participate in the interview with audio only and others also had their video switched on. The interviews stemmed from a set of questions that I asked about prior Hebrew knowledge and motivation to begin to learn. The questions were as follows:

1. What was your Hebrew education like as a child?
2. What motivated you to start learning Hebrew as an adult?
3. What advantages do you consider to be part of learning Hebrew as an adult?

These adults who began to learn Hebrew decoding in adulthood came from all walks of life. Some arrived with a healthy dose of skepticism, while others centered it as their passion project from the get-go. But what exactly motivated them to sign up for a class or otherwise commit to starting a Hebrew course? There are other courses that teach Jewish wisdom, with concepts more immediately applicable to daily life. Learning languages captured the imagination of certain people, regardless of how quickly the “effects” of that learning could be felt. I

hypothesized that language learning packed an outsize punch with respect to connecting to Jewish heritage and identity, and I set out to ask a small sample about their experiences. In a world where English is sufficient and foreign language learning skews more practical, I wanted to know: what about Hebrew animated adult learners?

Sometimes I asked the questions explicitly, other times I folded them into the natural flow of conversation. I employed active listening skills to achieve this. The salience of the topic and my position as rabbinic student spurred interview subjects to share generously. I asked open-ended questions aimed at extracting points both plainly practical and deeply spiritual, and the resulting interviews attest to the interweaving of these categories which I might define Jewishly as "mundane" and "holy." Once I collected the data, I read the transcripts and listened to the audio/video recordings at 1.5x speed. I followed along with the recording and transcriptions. I checked for interesting subject matter to cut and paste into a separate coding document, and at the same time I corrected the automatic transcription, which was not without its errors.

In constructing my qualitative research I wanted to talk with students who were at the beginning stages of their Hebrew learning. All maintained their sense of "beginner's mind," an attitude of childlike openness to challenge and discovery. In their studies they'd been made to view learning Hebrew with excitement and possibility. I viewed their learning with curiosity and a sense of trust that each one pursued Hebrew for a uniquely meaningful reason, rather than setting out to assess proficiency or competency with respect to language acquisition. This project focuses not on empirical analysis of language skills but on the elusive concept of Jewish identity.

Findings - Profiles of Adult Hebrew Learners

Across the different interviews I determined that students fell into one or more of the orientation categories laid out by Tickton Schuster. As I show through these profiles, a sense of Jewish connection is likely to emerge from Hebrew learning.

Goal-oriented learners learn Hebrew decoding to obtain a specific objective.

In this section, I introduce several goal-oriented learners, briefly introduce their motivations for studying Hebrew, and then explore how their study cultivated a profound Jewish connection.

Arlene, an attorney in her 60s, participates in genealogical research with others who came from her ancestral village in Eastern Europe. As explained by Gross, genealogical research can be considered a religious practice, akin to prayer or observance of festivals.[24] In the past, Arlene's group analyzed tattered documents written in Hebrew letters without any knowledge of the alphabet. Several times the researchers taped documents together along the wrong lines. Arlene learned Hebrew so she could oversee the reassembly of documents. Earlier in her life, Arlene attempted to learn Hebrew when her children were studying towards their b'nai mitzvah. Between that and a trip to Israel, she realized she was "getting nowhere" with her Hebrew studies. During the pandemic Arlene managed to "squeeze Hebrew into [her] schedule," and when I asked her how it was going, she said the following: "You know, I'm making more progress than I thought I would over the course of a couple of months. And now, if I look at the prayerbook, I can understand how to find out what's there." When she returned to Hebrew and focused on the decoding, she felt she made progress in being able to decipher words in the prayer book.

Nate has an eleven-year-old daughter who is studying for her bat mitzvah. He started to learn Hebrew so that he could help her prepare, which included reading prayers and reading from

[24] Gross, "Feeling Jewish."

the Torah scroll. They share a common learning disability, which Nate cites as one of the reasons he feels an obligation to tutor her. He also shared that his daughter often sat on the floor next to the computer while he went to Hebrew class on Zoom. Nate's wife is not Jewish, and as such, he spends time with his daughter exploring their common Jewish heritage. It is a goal to learn Hebrew for the bat mitzvah as much as it is a goal to spend quality time with his daughter.

Erika had just moved to a new city when she found a job teaching second-grade religious school. She had no prior knowledge of Hebrew, and her boss encouraged her to learn the Hebrew letters in preparation for the class. Her boss empowered Erika to learn the alphabet, and believed in her so much that he extended a job offer in good faith that she would–and could–learn it. This welcoming gesture encouraged Erika to pursue even more Jewish learning, particularly when she began to spend more time with her partner's family who strongly identify as Jewish and know Hebrew quite well compared to her.

A common theme that emerged from these goal-oriented learners is the familial context in which they used their new Hebrew skills. Arlene participates in the tracing of her family's lineage. Nate actively transmits Hebrew to his daughter. And Erika applies Hebrew in her family and work life. The goals they set for themselves brought them to their learning so they could achieve a specific task or set of tasks. But once they had the skills, they were ready to locate themselves in the Jewish community and partake in its meaningful connections.

Nate set a goal to spend more time with his daughter in Jewish contexts, a motif in Jewish wisdom described as the transmission of tradition from generation to generation, *l'dor v'dor*. He described feeling a burden to "bring the culture to her" as the one Jewish parent in their household. Aside from the acquisition of cultural and linguistic contours of being Jewish, Nate

felt the need to, as her father, transmit the Jewish tradition to the next generation just as his parents did for him.

Erika now works as a Jewish professional where she organizes college students and pursues her own Jewish learning that she applies in her work. After learning the minimum required to teach her class, she felt strongly about continuing her learning:

> When I'm in services, I could, you know, look at a word. And even if I couldn't read it out loud from scratch myself, I knew the letters enough to be like, that's a sound. And so, it felt like I was being more grounded in the Jewish service. I was a more knowledgeable participant in Jewish prayer.

Like Erika, Arlene's ambivalence about her place in the Jewish community changed once she began to learn Hebrew. Considering how she was raised, the goals she articulated brought her more deeply into the Jewish community. About her upbringing, she said: "I had never belonged to a synagogue before, and my mother prohibited me from going to synagogue and said it was a sexist, totalitarian religion."

Activity oriented learners learn for the sake of the activity itself and like the social dimensions of education

In this section I will profile several activity-oriented learners to see how their study facilitated Jewish connection.

Ed always took an interest in language. In recollections of travels abroad he described the impulse to learn how to pronounce words in whatever language was spoken in that country. Though he has no desire to be fluent in any other languages, the act of studying language

satisfies him. He gave the example of poring over King Arthur books to trace that variety of English to the English spoken now. He gets his motivation to learn Hebrew from the same place of curiosity as his interest in King Arthur. Ed likes to participate in language activities and enjoys piecing together the different components of language like spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. In fifth grade, Ed came across a small hardcover book that taught the Hebrew alphabet. Using this book, he learned the alphabet and its sounds, but over time his retention of the information dwindled and his Hebrew knowledge went unused for many years. In retirement and during the pandemic era, Ed has been able to resume his Hebrew study by coming to classes. He also reads a daily email newsletter that contains a bit of Jewish text and practices reading Hebrew that way.

Aside from his interest in languages in general, Ed has felt that Hebrew and Jewish education more broadly has been something like a "forbidden fruit" in his life, having been raised secularly and in a gender role (he is trans) that prohibited his participation in much of Jewish life. Engaging in Jewish activities is a reversal of the withholding he encountered as a child. Ed also expressly desires a comprehension of the prayers, which adds goal-orientation to his Hebrew learning. Reading the Hebrew prayers isn't enough of a connection for him, although he does it. His goal is for comprehension of the prayers. He doesn't always remember what he learns, which he attributes to his age. Systematically going through the workbook to learn Hebrew works for his mind and learning style and achieves much of what he sets as his goals for Hebrew. Whether he retains or applies what he learns isn't of much importance, he claims: "I'm just going to continue to muddle through at a slow pace and enjoy the learning, and gradually it'll probably get better."

Like Ed, Naomi, an empty nester in her 60s, spent time abroad and considered language learning an important part of knowing the world. In addition, Naomi sought opportunities to

learn Hebrew when she became an empty nester. Starting to learn Hebrew was a way to spend her newfound free time and she continues to pursue it without an explicit goal. She learns Hebrew to connect with members of her community in the suburban Jewish enclave where she lives. She believes that spending time learning Hebrew will enhance her connection to the Israeli Hebrew speakers in her life and grant her access to Jewish communal spaces for religious and cultural activities, in a different way than if she didn't know Hebrew. Although she expressed a desire to visit Israel and converse with Israeli Hebrew speakers, Naomi's learning was not exclusively for the purpose of achieving fluency. Rather, she stated that her learning was about encountering another language much as she had done when she was younger, having lived in France and achieving fluency in French. She expressed wishing she had learned Hebrew at an earlier age, pointing out the advantage she had with a younger, sharper brain for learning languages.

Naomi identified an emotional outcome of her Hebrew study: happiness. She explicitly said that it would make her very happy to be able to carry a conversation in Hebrew. She also cites her classmates and teachers as motivating factors for showing up to Hebrew classes. Now that she is an empty-nester, Naomi reflected on having raised two boys with her husband who now have strong ties to their Judaism and expressing it. The different groups she took part in helped her with Hebrew, but more than that, Naomi was driven by the social aspect of meeting for class. With no kids to care for daily, she explored many different ways to stay engaged in the community. She grew up "very Reform" while her husband grew up Orthodox, and they met in the middle when establishing how they would raise their children and hold a household. One activity she likes is watching Israeli TV shows on Netflix, but she wishes she did not need to turn on subtitles. During the pandemic having the TV as an outlet has been fun for Naomi and her

husband and provides an exciting way for them to get familiar with Israel. Naomi's experience with Hebrew is informed by her approach to learning in general. As she puts it, "it is important to make mistakes." It's clear that language learning requires a bit of fearlessness when it comes to trying and failing. Naomi's willingness to try and fail on repeat, and learn from those mistakes, secures both a promising Hebrew education and a meaningful connection to Judaism as a result. She said "I just enjoy speaking in another language, especially one that's so connected to my religion."

For Harriet, participation in synagogue events like services and Hebrew classes provide her with a profound Jewish connection. In her own words: "I go for the connection. As untraditional as I can be, I'm a traditionalist. I like tradition. I like to do things that are traditional sometimes." The Jewish community always occupied a large part in her identity, even though as a girl in an Orthodox community she could not learn and participate in the same ways as her brothers. As an adult she joined a synagogue whose values aligned with her own. The more involved she became, the more she felt her enjoyment of that community increase.

Learning-oriented learners "possess a fundamental desire to know and to grow through inquiry."

Over the years Imogen, who is an artist, managed to avoid Judaism in both her professional and personal life. But her work has been called very "folksy and Jewish" by others, which she initially interpreted to be an antisemitic comment. Having grown up staunchly secular, conflation of her identity and her work with Judaism puzzled her and ultimately led her to join a synagogue during the pandemic. She suddenly found time in her busy schedule to join a synagogue and opted to begin studying for an adult bat mitzvah ceremony, which included

learning with me in a Hebrew decoding class. For over a year she participated in more Jewish learning than she, not to mention her parents, could ever dream of. As the severity of the pandemic dwindled and she returned to more in-person activities, Imogen's participation waned and she has suspended her synagogue membership. Owing to a busy schedule and feeling that her patience with Torah Study had been exhausted, Jewish learning was no longer an activity she put her time and energy toward. But during the year or so that she did make Jewish learning an activity in her weeks, the spiritual growth was undeniable. In small groups on Zoom Imogen would frequently express her strong opinions about the issue at hand. Recently, she emailed me late at night asking (a bit frantically) if there was a prayer to be said for narrowly escaping death (there is: it's *birkat hagomel*)–a lightbulb inside a glass fixture had exploded above her head, raining glass and sparks down on her. So, the involvement with the synagogue undoubtedly serves her spiritual needs. Imogen's mindset and worldview as an artist make the spiritual connection of learning Hebrew feel somewhat duller. Her spirituality comes out in yoga and in her art, no doubt, not necessarily in Jewish learning. She did not regret any of her Jewish learning, but it was an activity to give her more perspective on the other aspects of her personal and professional life–not for the content itself.

Imogen also had somewhat of a spiritual orientation in her learning that went beyond the plain fact that she enjoyed it. An artist by trade, Imogen spoke freely about spirituality, even as she struggled to define it: "I don't know what spiritualism is. And so I don't know how to enact it except to access it through my mind because I don't access Judaism through my body. I access art through the body, but not Judaism. And so I access all of Judaism through my mind, and it flows in through my mind and down to my heart." The experience of this non-spirituality in her newfound Jewish community during the pandemic afforded her a profound Jewish connection.

Through active participation through learning Hebrew she navigated personal transformation from a completely secular person who avoided religion to someone who came to synagogue frequently to learn about and question her heritage in many terms, including in spiritual terms.

Elyssa is a 30-something who grew up on the periphery of Jewish community and only got involved in learning Jewish tradition as an adult. Learning Hebrew has helped Elyssa feel like more of a participant in Jewish spaces:

> It allows me to engage with prayers in a really different way. Even looking at a prayer book and looking at the transliteration and also the Hebrew. I don't feel like I'm looking at random shapes anymore. It still is really slow for me to translate, but I feel closer to the words in the text because I can understand it and identify it a little bit more. Rather than just reading the English translation or transliteration and having it end there, it's really fun for me to get to translate things I'm reading.

Elyssa reports that just being able to identify the shapes on the page, even just that they are known entities and not random shapes, brings Elyssa a sense of relief when considering the strangeness she can often feel when participating in Jewish life. She expressed an appreciation for the way Jewish learning makes no assumptions–there is no grade or "right" answer, and she has become comfortable with her relatively little knowledge. As she put it, "I think sometimes [Jewish learning] makes me feel a little bit like an outsider. But I really appreciate that I get to ask questions and do it in a way that feels in alignment with me."

Connie appreciated the learning for learning's sake. In addition to studying the alphabet, she participated in her synagogue's Saturday morning Torah study group and sought additional opportunities to study rabbinic texts. She knew she needed to learn to decode Hebrew before she moved on to translation and interpretation. In her voice and in her comments she conveyed a sense of appreciation for the higher meaning of her learning beyond the purely practical. The time she devoted to Jewish study certainly built on her skills, but her spiritual orientation pervaded every comment she made about her activities.

> I've come to find out that I was doing something that was not very familiar to me, but I like being engaged in it. I like being swept up in it. And I've come to find out that that's prayer, which is sort of surprising.

Engaging with her Judaism by learning some of the spiritual tools provided her with the profound Jewish connection she had been pursuing since the death of her son. She started to attend services in the wake of this tragedy and has been changed as a result. She derives meaning from all the activities she does at the synagogue, from prayer to learning.

Conclusion

Hebrew education, even at the foundational level of decoding, can facilitate Jewish connection for adult beginners. These beginners elect to learn Hebrew for a number of different reasons, which fall into the categories of goal-, activity-, and learning-oriented. In adulthood, they started from the beginning with the Hebrew ABCs in order to forge a connection to Judaism by means of their learning. A mystical understanding of the Hebrew alphabet gives credence to

the enormous potential for Jewish connection. From a sociolinguistic and pedagogical perspective, doing something that is easy like learning an alphabet makes room for interesting experiences. With a low bar to entry, big things can happen in the classroom and outside of it, as evidenced in the profiles of the adult Hebrew learners in this paper. This paper shows how adult Jewish learners pursue things like connection and religious literacy, including Hebrew, and a class as elementary as Hebrew decoding has the potential to surface those needs and desires from the learners.

My suspicion is that this treatment of Hebrew decoding can help reframe the pedagogy of Jewish learning experiences for those who partake as students, teachers, and theorists. Beginning with the alphabet, and proceeding onto every nook and cranny of the Jewish library and cultural experience, Jewish adults will start to feel less alienation and lighter baggage. Since Hebrew decoding presents a low-level but high-reward proposition, anyone can access it at any time. Imagine the people who might soon opt into starting with *alef* and following it wherever it goes.

I would like to thank my advisor, Sarah Bunin Benor, Ph.D., who tirelessly guided me through this project from start to finish. Additional thanks are due to my teachers at the three HUC-JIR campuses that I have called home: Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and New York. My rabbinical, cantorial, and educational classmates have supported me and each other through our five long, eventful years at HUC, and it is through them that I will remember my years in rabbinical school. Finally, I am grateful for the limitless kindness and support shown to me by my family, friends, pets, and partner.

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Appendix: Workshop Slides

Life in Every Letter

Kol Ot Chayeinu: כל אות חיינו

Noah Westreich

In the chat:

- Share one memory of learning Hebrew. How old were you? What do you remember?
- Is Hebrew currently part of your life?

Sarah Benor, Netta Avineri, and Nicki Greninger, "Let's Stop Calling It 'Hebrew School'"

- Most schools emphasize decoding and recitation of Liturgical and Biblical Hebrew without comprehension for the purpose of ritual participation.
- In addition, most schools practice Hebrew infusion–the incorporation of Hebrew words, songs, and signs into the primarily English environment. The (unstated) goal of infusion is to foster a metalinguistic community of Jews who value Hebrew.
- Many schools have trouble finding teachers with sufficient Hebrew knowledge.
- Online Hebrew learning is gaining some traction.

Martin Buber, "On Education" (1925):

Man, the child of man, wants to make things. He does not merely find pleasure in seeking a form arise from material that presented itself as formless. What the child desires is its own share in this becoming of things: it wants to be the subject of this event of production.

[...]

A good expression of this instinct is the way children of intellectual passion produce speech, in reality not as something they have taken over but with the headlong powers of utter newness: sound after sound tumbles out of them, rushing from the vibrating throat past the trembling lips into the world's air, and the whole of the little vital body vibrates and trembles, too, shaken by a bursting shower of selfhood.

Sefer Yetzirah Ch. 2:2-3

עשרים ושתים אותיות חקקן חצבן שקלן והמירן צרפן וצר בהם נפש כל כל היצור ונפש כל העתיד לצור. עשרים ושתים אותיות יסוד חקוקות בקול חצובות ברוח קבועות בפה בחמשה מקומות אחה"ע בומ"ף גיכ"ק דטלנ"ת זסשר"ץ.

[God] hath formed, weighed, transmuted, composed, and created with these twenty-two letters every living being, and every soul yet uncreated. Twenty-two letters are formed by the voice, impressed on the air, and audibly uttered in five situations: in the throat as guttural sounds; in the palate as palatals; by the tongue as linguals; through the teeth as dentals; and by the lips as labial sounds.

Rachel Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice*

Viewing individuals' relationships with families, communities, ancestors, and the divine as central to religion allows us to see how individuals who do not regard themselves "religious" make meaning in their lives, as well as how those who do see themselves as religious find meaning outside of traditional practices, guided by a variety of supposedly secular institutions and materials.

Benay Lappe, "A Letter to Students"

At SVARA, no matter what your Hebrew level, you will be learning Talmud in the original, from the Vilna Shas. There will never be a translation between you and the text. Nor anyone telling you what the tradition says or what it means. At SVARA, you will gain the skills to look at a page of Talmud – any page – and enter into the millennia-old conversation for yourself.

Jack Mezirow, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*

Perspective transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma – a divorce, death of a loved one, change in job status, retirement, or other. The disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or by one's efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one's presuppositions. Anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or "trigger events" that precipitate critical reflection and transformations.

Shabbat 104a 1/3

אָמְרִי לֵיהּ רַבָּנַן לְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי אֲתוֹ דַּרְדְּקֵי הָאִידָּנָא לְבֵי מִדְרְשָׁא וַאֲמַרוּ מִילֵּי דַּאֲפִילּוּ בִּימֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בִּן נוּן לָא אִיתְּמַר כְּווֹתַיְיהוּ

The Sages said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Young students came to the study hall and said things [the likes of which were not said] even in the days of Joshua bin Nun.

Shabbat 104a 2/3

ג ד

אָלֶ״ף בֵּי״ת — אֵלַף בִּינָה. גִּימ״ל דָּל״ת — גְּמוֹל דַּלִּים. מַאי טַעְמָא פְּשׁוּטָה כַּרְעֵיהּ דְּגִימ״ל לְגַבֵּי דָּל״ת — שְׁכֵן דַּרְכּוֹ שֶׁל גּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים לָרוּץ אַחַר דַּלִּים. וּמַאי טַעְמָא פְּשׁוּטָה כַּרְעֵיהּ דְּדָל״ת לְגַבֵּי גִּימ״ל — דַּלְיָמְצִיָה לֵיהּ נַפְשַׁיְיהּ. וּמַאי טַעְמָא מְהַדַּר אַפֵּיהּ דְּדָל״ת מִגִּימ״ל — דַּלִּיתֵן לֵיהּ בְּצִינְעָה, כִּי הֵיכִי דְּלָא לִיכְסֵיף מִינֵּיהּ.

Alef beit means **learn** [***elaf***] the **wisdom** [***bina***] of the Torah. ***Gimmel dalet*** means **give to the poor** [***gemol dalim***]. **Why is the leg of the *gimmel* extended toward** the ***dalet*****? Because it is the manner of one who bestows loving-kindness to pursue the poor. And why** is the **leg of** the ***dalet* extended toward** the ***gimmel*****?** It is so **that** a poor person **will make himself available to him** who wants to give him charity. **And why does the *dalet* face away from** the ***gimmel*****?** It is to teach **that one should give** charity **discreetly so that** the poor person **will not be embarrassed by him.**

Shabbat 104a 3/3

שי״ן — שֶׁקֶר. תִּי״ו — אֱמֶת. מַאי טַעְמָא שֶׁקֶר מְקֻרְבָן מִילֶּיהָ, אֱמֶת מְרֻחָקָא מִילֶּיהָ? — שִׁיקְרָא שְׁכִיחַ, קוּשְׁטָא לָא שְׁכִיחַ. וּמַאי טַעְמָא שִׁיקְרָא אַחְדָּא כַּרְעֵיהּ קָאֵי, וְאֱמֶת מְלֻבֶּן לְבוֹנֵי — קוּשְׁטָא קָאֵי, שִׁיקְרָא לָא קָאֵי.

***Shin*: Falsehood [*sheker*]. *Tav*: Truth [*emet*].**

Why are the letters of the word ***sheker*** **adjacent** to one another in the alphabet, while **the letters of *emet* are distant** from one another? That is because while **falsehood is** easily **found, truth is found** only with great difficulty. **And why do** the letters that comprise the word ***sheker*** all **stand on one foot, and** the letters that comprise the word ***emet*** stand on bases that are wide like **bricks?** Because the **truth stands** eternal and **falsehood does not stand** eternal.

שקר אמת

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Ed: Language Lover

Aside from his interest in languages in general, Ed felt that Hebrew and Jewish education more broadly has been something like a "forbidden fruit" in his life. Engaging in Jewish activities is a reversal of the withholding he encountered as a child.

"I'm just going to continue to muddle through at a slow pace and enjoy the learning, and gradually it'll probably get better."

Imogen: Mining for Meaning

"I don't know what spiritualism is. And so I don't know how to enact it except to access it through my mind because I don't access Judaism through my body. I access art through the body, but not Judaism. And so I access all of Judaism through my mind, and it flows in through my mind and down to my heart."

Arlene: Amateur Genealogist

Arlene participates in genealogical research with others who came from her ancestral village in Eastern Europe. In the past, Arlene's group analyzed tattered documents written in Hebrew letters without any knowledge of the alphabet. Several times the researchers taped documents together along the wrong lines. Arlene learned Hebrew so she could oversee the reassembly of documents.

Connie: Burgeoning *Soferet*

"One of the things that I realized is that if I wrote out the words that it went from my hand to my brain much easier. I found an online course where somebody gave me wonderful tips about writing Hebrew calligraphy. But I didn't have the right tools; I didnt have the right pen tips. I didn't have the right paper. I didn't have the right size things. And so I now copy Hebrew in calligraphy. I have pages and pages and pages of practice, and I decided to make little boxes out of them."

You?

Thanks for coming-
תודה שבאתם!