



HEBREW: A GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN FOR JEWISH IDENTITY

by WAYNE L. FIRESTONE

The trends we are seeing on increasingly global and diverse college campuses represent an opportunity to reignite a universal connection to the language of our ancestors and of our Israeli friends and family.

While the Jewish world bemoans the increasing secularization and apathy among young Jews, Hebrew presents an opportunity for students to explore Jewish identity in their own language.

Over the past decade, the Jewish people have unwittingly launched a marketing campaign for a seemingly fledgling enterprise: Hebrew. To the best of my knowledge, this campaign has been generated without a plan or a budget, and without an organization or university devoting significant resources or energies to it. Yet from what I have seen on university campuses across the United States and around the world, I can testify that this grassroots campaign is working to engender a linguistic and cultural resuscitation of Modern Hebrew.

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HEBREW ON THE QUAD

In its most crude form, college students are wearing Hebrew, quite literally, on their sleeves. Transliterations of the names of their alma maters (Duke, Stanford and Yale) and sometimes even their political candidates adorn their t-shirts and sweat-shirts as they cross the campus quads. A decade ago, personal affinities were expressed in English with catch phrases like “Shalom Y’all,” “Israel Is Real” and “Super Jew.” Now, it is commonplace to see young people expressing their affinity publicly in its Hebrew form: *Tzahal*, *Hadag Nachash* and *Magen David Adom*. The *Alef Bet* has been dusted off and is now strutting around campus.

Wearing a t-shirt certainly does not connote a deep understanding of Hebrew, but it does demonstrate that students are encountering the language and its culture at universities and in other public settings. Some are exposed to it as a study text during a



service learning trip to post-Katrina New Orleans; others encounter Hebrew texts and the ancient letters in an academic context through Judaic studies and Modern Hebrew courses. Hillel professionals in countries from Ukraine to Argentina connect with students and colleagues through Hebrew in songs, prayers and cultural celebrations, and here in the U.S., Sochnut-trained Israel Fellows use Hebrew to teach about Israeli culture. In one of these informal sessions at the University of Florida, the translating of a Meir Shalev description of the preparation of an Israeli goat-cheese sandwich even generated a campus-wide demand for the culinary creation.

Proud Jewish students are using Hebrew quotes and Hebrew names in their Facebook profiles and tweets, and Masa Israel Journey interns recruit their peers to experience the language in its homeland. In the past decade, we have seen a huge increase in the number of students visiting Ben Yehuda Street via Taglit-Birthright Israel trips, which have brought over a quarter million young Jews to Israel and continue to introduce a cultural facet of Judaism to a new generation. These students return to campus not only with newly adopted Jewish names and cool shirts they bought in the *shuk*, or market, but also as walking, talking advertisements for our people and our language.

No, this is not the poetic Hebrew of

Yehuda Amichai nor the grammatically correct language of Ben Yehuda, but rather the awkward, accented Hebrew of a foreign tongue, struggling to claim Jewish roots and to forge individual identity.

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTIC IDENTITY

Life on campus is more global and culturally diverse than ever before. Ethnic particularism and authenticity are, though I am hesitant to use these terms, “relevant” and “cool.” Current students comprise the most ethnically diverse generation to attend college, and, as such, are much more familiar with foreign cultures. Also, the number of students studying abroad has doubled in the past decade, sparking increased interest in exotic places and foreign languages. At the same time, language has become more accessible, with new technology placing language tools in the hands of curious students who tote iPads and smart phones equipped with programs like Google Translator and Babel Fish. This broader context has provided an opportunity for new exposure to Hebrew as the *shoresh*, the root, of an ancient civilization as well as a modern culture.

Ahad Ha'am recognized that Hebrew is “a language that lives not (only) in books, but in the mouths of people” (Ahad Ha'am, *The Battle of Languages*, 1906). A hundred years ago, the linguistic battle between Hebrew, Yiddish and German was viewed as a zero-sum game. Hebrew had been preserved as the ancient language of the Bible and Jewish scholarship, but it lay dormant in the mouths of its people. In Israel today, Modern Hebrew is alive and well, thriving in a new era and amidst a new culture. Yet many are disheartened by a lack of emphasis on the Hebrew language in the Diaspora, particularly in America. The trends we are seeing on increasingly global and diverse college campuses represent an opportunity to reignite a universal connection to the language of our ancestors and of our Israeli friends and family.

Perhaps the driving force behind this interest is Jewish Peoplehood, a desire for meaningful social connection to family, friends and community that extends far beyond one's local context. Inherent in that desire is a search for identity. Stu-

dents today are open and connected to the world, and they are exploring their identity and culture in entirely new ways. The increasing interest in and awareness of Hebrew presents an accessible means to connect to the Jewish people and civilization — our people's past, present and future. For some it may require spending additional time in Israel in *ulpan* classes. Others can access the language immediately through their gadgets, friends and the resources available to them on campus. In any case, we must re-imagine Hebrew's potential to spark curiosity, growth and identity building, in turn inspiring an enduring commitment to Jewish life.

ANCIENT TRADITION AND CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY

We need to recognize the Hebrew language as a valuable portal for self-exploration and Jewish identity building by encouraging students to understand the meaning behind their names, to connect to other Jews around the world, and even to delve into the mystical dimensions of *Gematria*, kabbalistic numerology. The success of such exploration certainly relies on programmatic solutions, but more importantly requires an attitudinal shift in how the Jewish community thinks about the Hebrew language and what it holds for our people: a deep connection between our ancient tradition and our contemporary expression of Jewish identity.

As someone who moved to Israel with only a very basic understanding of the language, I understand that learning and studying Hebrew is hard. Perhaps Hebrew is not the first or easiest way to engage a student in search of Jewish connection. Yet as an educator and professional, I know that often the most difficult challenges present the greatest opportunities for identity growth in our students.

Today, fortunately, we do not have to relive Ben Yehuda's struggle to create a living language. Building on his success, we can make Hebrew and its ancient letters relevant and accessible to a new generation of questioning young adults. This is the generation to champion Jewish identity, and they have tacitly lent their marketing skills to the cause. Ironically, now the emerging question is whether we can understand their language. ■